


EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Between Elections and Actions

Edited by
MIHAI ALEXANDRESCU



Presa Universitară Clujeană

European Parliament:
Between Elections and Action

Edited by
Mihai Alexandrescu

PRESA UNIVERSITARĂ CLUJEANĂ

2024

Referenți științifici:

Conf. univ. dr. Claudiu Marian

Conf. univ. dr. Mihnea Stoica

Responsabilitatea pentru conținutul capitolelor aparține autorilor acestora

ISBN 978-606-37-2342-1

© 2024 Coordonatorul volumului. Toate drepturile rezervate.
Reproducerea integrală sau parțială a textului, prin orice mijloace, fără
acordul coordonatorului, este interzisă și se pedepsește conform legii.

Tehnoredactare computerizată: Cristian-Marius Nuna

Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai

Presa Universitară Clujeană

Director: Codruța Săcelean

Str. B.P. Hasdeu nr. 51

400371 Cluj-Napoca, România

Tel. (+40)-744-687.884

E-mail: editura@editura.ubbcluj.ro

<http://www.editura.ubbcluj.ro/>

<https://libraria.ubbcluj.ro/>

Content

Foreword	4
----------------	---

Part 1.

The Power Mechanisms of the European Parliament	7
---	---

Mihai ALEXANDRESCU

The Role of the European Parliament Member: Between Election and Parliamentary Duties	8
---	---

Paul POPA

European Parliament's International Role in Promoting and Protecting Human Rights	52
---	----

Doru TODORESCU

The Power of the European Parliament in Budgetary Negotiations: A Case Study of the MFF and NGEU	88
--	----

Part 2.

Democratic Participation and Electoral Manifestations	116
--	-----

Natalia CUGLEȘAN

Participatory Democracy and the Conference on the Future of Europe. Can the EU Institutions Translate Citizens' Ideas Into Concrete Action and Be a Voice of Reform?	117
--	-----

Marcela SĂLĂGEAN, Marius MUREȘAN

The First European Parliament Elections in Romania (2007)	139
---	-----

Ștefan MAROȘAN

Populism in the 2024 European Parliament Elections in Romania. Case Study: Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR)	166
--	-----

Foreword

This volume was conceived to discuss the role that the European Parliament (EP) has assumed within the European Union. The year 2024 marks the beginning of the EP's tenth legislature since it was first directly elected by the citizens of the EU member states.

The book brings together several contributions aimed at providing an in-depth approach to the functioning mechanisms of the EP and how it fulfils its mandate to represent European citizens. The purpose of this work is to analyse and better understand the role of the EP in the current decision-making context, especially during a time when the democratic legitimacy of European institutions is intensely debated. The Parliament's evolution from a consultative to a legislative body displays the constant efforts to democratise the European decision-making process.

The first part of the work, titled "The Power Mechanisms of the European Parliament", opens with an introductory chapter explaining the role of the MEP, who oscillates between the expectations of national voters and the constraints of European political groups. Following this, Paul Popa's study addresses the role of the EP in fostering human rights internationally, analysing the tools through which the EP has strengthened its position as a defender of European values. In an increasingly unsteady international context, this contribution emphasises how the EP seeks to assert a distinct voice in global human rights policy.

Doru Todorescu provides a detailed analysis of the EP's role in budgetary negotiations, focusing on how the Parliament influenced negotiations related to the Multiannual Financial Framework and NextGenerationEU. The author stresses the EP's budgetary power in shaping the political and economic priorities of the European Union.

The second part of the volume, "Democratic Participation and Electoral Manifestations," begins with Natalia Cugleşan's analysis of the Conference on the Future of Europe initiative. She emphasises the limits and potential of this endeavour to transform citizens' ideas into European policies. The debate on the EU's democratic deficit takes centre stage, and her analysis brings forward several themes explaining why the question of the future of EU reform remains unresolved.

Marcela Sălăgean and Marius Mureşan examine Romania's first elections for the European Parliament in 2007, offering a historical analysis of this event for Romania's integration into the EU. Their study highlights how these elections influenced not only the Romanian political scene but also the electorate's perception of European institutions.

Another important aspect is addressed by Ştefan Maroşan, who scrutinises the populism phenomenon in the 2024 European elections, focusing on the case of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians. His analysis provides a critical understanding of how populist parties influence European electoral competition and the implications for the future of European integration.

This work aims to be a helpful tool for those interested in how the European Parliament works, from its internal mechanisms

to electoral dynamics. Without drawing definitive conclusions, the volume suggests a series of reflections on a pivotal moment for the democratic future of the European Union.

I wish to express my gratitude to all those who contributed valuable suggestions in shaping the concept of this work. A special thought of appreciation goes to the publishing house – *Presă Universitară Clujeană*, whose meticulous proofreading and editing were essential to ensuring the high quality of this volume.

Mihai Alexandrescu
Cluj, September 15, 2024

Part 1

The Power Mechanisms of the European Parliament

The Role of the European Parliament Member: Between Election and Parliamentary Duties

*Mihai ALEXANDRESCU**

Introduction

The most common image of the European Parliament (EP) is that of the candidate running for the position of Member of the European Parliament (MEP). The majority of European Union (EU) citizens do not know their MEPs. They typically discover them during European election campaigns, when candidates present themselves to voters with various electoral programs in a transactional approach. After this moment, which faithfully repeats every five years, the image of the MEP fades into the background of the Parliament's plenary sessions. Caught in the corridors of a sophisticated labyrinth built by the EP's internal regulations, MEPs become prisoners of the European political groups to which they are affiliated and of the national political parties on whose lists they were elected.

* Dr. Mihai Alexandrescu is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of International Studies and Contemporary History of the Faculty of History and Philosophy (Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9584-4262>

Unlike ministers from member states, who participate in a Council meeting for one or two days and then return home (Craig & Burca, 2011), MEPs primarily carry out their activities in Brussels, with one session per month in Strasbourg. Understanding how the EP is formed and structured and the main procedures for conducting its activities is essential for appropriately analysing an MEP's role in elections and actions during a legislative term.

The Composition of the European Parliament

When addressing the composition of the European Parliament, we must consider two dimensions that define this institution: the election of its members and, subsequently, their political behaviour. Analysing the electoral dimension requires a prior definition of the institutional framework for representing the activities of member states in the EP and an analysis of the electoral process from which the elected members of the EP emerge.

Representativeness

To understand representativeness in the European Parliament, it is necessary to explore, in part, the principles that underpin this model. We consider the international principle of equality among states, the federal-democratic principle, and the principle of degressive proportionality. The compromise among these three principles is the very image of the current stage of European construction.

Competition Between the Voice of Citizens and the Decisions of Member States

Those who accelerated the process of democratizing the European economic integration were the European deputies, starting from the first legislature constituted after the first direct elections for the European Parliament in June 1979. Enthusiastic about being the first European parliamentarians directly elected by the citizens of their states, the European deputies increasingly demanded a reduction of what was then called the democratic deficit. The massive impact that the policies of the European Communities had on the citizens of the member states, offering them unprecedented economic and social rights, increasingly amplified the voices of those who wondered why citizens were not directly involved in developing European policies so they could express their own point of view, not just through their own governments.

This competition that opened between the citizens' voices and the decisions of the member states questioned precisely a fundamental attribute of state sovereignty: the external representation of their own citizens. Until the elections of June 1979, the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Communities was composed of deputies who were members of national parliaments (Nugent, 2017).

The construction of the Internal Market as the core of European economic integration was not initially conceived as a democratic process in which the citizens of the member states would be consulted. It was always perceived as an elitist process that was the sovereign attribute of the member states through their governments within permanent intergovernmental negotiations in the Council

of Ministers. The decisions of the Council were transmitted to the European Commission, whose primary role is to create European legislative proposals. After their approval by the ministers, these were to be implemented by the European Commission as a supranational body independent of the member states. The benefits for economic development were visible but were considered to have too slow a pace due to intergovernmental disputes, which became increasingly visible after the "empty chair" crisis provoked in the summer of 1965 by the President of France, Charles de Gaulle (Dinan, 2005).

The construction of EU citizenship was preceded by several decades of its official establishment through the Maastricht Treaty (1992). The Court of Justice of the European Communities acted, until Maastricht, "as an activist for citizens" (Popa, 2023, p. 87), protecting their economic and social rights that largely arose from their status as workers in other member states than their own. In numerous situations, these rights were won by citizens against the governments of member states, which used to ignore wage and social discrimination against employees coming from other member states (Alexandrescu, 2023).

This feeling among citizens that national governments did not want to apply non-discriminatory treatments to citizens from other member states was also one of the factors that encouraged the demand to strengthen the democratic character of the European Parliament.

What was only an intergovernmental application of the principle of equality among states now became an argument for the need to democratize the process of European integration. This endeavour could be achieved by consolidating and extending the

role of the EP, which, until 1986, when the Single European Act was adopted, had only a consultative, not a decision-making role.

The introduction of the co-decision procedure, through the equal involvement of the EP alongside the Council of Ministers in adopting community legislation, represented the most eloquent manifestation of the competition between EU citizens (represented by the EP) and the governments of the member states, which meet in the Council of Ministers through the relevant councils depending on the field of legislation (industry, energy, economy, environment, health, etc.).

The continuous strengthening of the EP's power through successive treaties that modified the Maastricht Treaty (i.e., the Treaties of Amsterdam, Nice, and Lisbon) led to a radical change in the intergovernmental project with supranational coordination, as it was initially conceived, into a project that some authors perceive as being "federal on multiple levels" (Härtel, 2012). However, one cannot speak of a federation as long as member states retain sovereignty in their essential domains: defence policy and foreign policy. Even concerning the economic domain, states have the possibility to formulate their own national policies for numerous sectors (Wallace et al., 2014).

Moreover, the intergovernmental dimension did not disappear with the direct involvement of the EP through the co-decision procedure (which was renamed the ordinary legislative procedure in 2009). The Council must share the decision with the European Parliament. Intentionally, to protect the sovereignty dimension of the member states, the Treaty of Lisbon introduced Article 50, through which any state can initiate the procedures to withdraw from the EU. Accession to the EU implies pooling the

sovereignties of the member states and assuming their participation in the process of economic integration. The federal flavour observed in the manifestation of the EU is procedural-institutional, not constitutional. The inclusion of Article 50 confirmed this detail.

All these aspects need to be understood to explain why the federal-democratic principle and the principle of degressive proportionality are the ones that shape the form of representation in the European Parliament.

Although the EP has gained many rights in its relationship with the Council, it must be specified that it is not a European-level extension of national parliamentarism. This confusion has always been present in the narrative manifestations and political attitudes of some European deputies in the last four decades (Dinan, 2005).

Being an organization built and maintained through the intergovernmental action of the member states, European parliamentarism must be distinct from the classical national or federal approach. Even if the transformation of the EP into a federal institution appears in the projects of some European federalist politicians, such as Joschka Fischer (2000), this is unlikely in the absence of transforming the European Union into a federation based on a constitutional treaty.

Two levels of parliamentary representation (national and European) cannot coexist in the same substance if both claim to represent popular sovereignty. Therefore, parliamentarism at the level of the European Union is, at least in this stage of the evolution of European integration, the expression of a democratization of the decision-making process for the direct support of the European citizen, who claims first and foremost to be a citizen of a member state (Alexandrescu, 2023). Furthermore, as an additional argument,

it must be emphasized that European citizenship was not created either to find a federation or to undermine member states but to protect national citizens in their relations with member states where they exercise the rights conferred by the treaties.

Even in Härtel's (2012) interpretation, the federal-democratic character highlights the citizen without weakening the sovereign state from which they come or in which they exercise the freedoms of movement provided in community law. However, it should also be noted that, according to the Union's treaties, citizens can vote in European Parliament elections in the state where they reside without being conditioned by possessing the citizenship of that state (see Alexandrescu, 2023).

Beyond this evident effort to democratize the process of European integration, it is marked by a constant tension between the sovereignty of member states and the democratization of European institutions, a fact reflected in the perceptions and attitudes of voters regarding a common electoral agenda. Even if the European Parliament has gained an increasingly strong role in the European decision-making process, citizens have not yet developed a clear awareness of this agenda, often voting based on national concerns. This tension is observed throughout the evolution of the democratization of the European Union (Nugent, 2017).

Empirical studies show that since 1979, when the first direct elections for the European Parliament took place, political competition has largely revolved around national issues. Although European topics have begun to be present, concerns related to the EU have been subordinated to national interests, which explains why pro- and anti-EU orientations are not dominant in elections. Voting is still based on the traditional left-right political axis, and citizens'

concerns related to European policies remain limited (van der Eijk & Franklin, 2004).

In 2014, although the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten in the European Parliament elections aimed to achieve a closer connection of citizens with the European decision-making process, electoral campaigns were dominated by national themes, which reduced the impact of this mechanism on creating a common agenda and pushed such an initiative into the background. The majority of voters continued to vote in response to the national problems of the moment, not being influenced by the new European mechanisms (Hobolt, 2014).

A key factor contributing to the electorate's attitude can be considered the influence of the media on the public perception of the EU. Media in the member states tend to contextualize European issues through the lens of local interests, emphasizing the benefits and costs of EU membership rather than promoting a common debate at the European level. Through this practice, journalism unknowingly contributes to weakening the perception of a common European agenda and encourages citizens to focus on their own national realities (Boomgaarden et al., 2011).

Moreover, Eurosceptic perceptions, which have grown more vigorous in some member states, are built on fears related to the loss of sovereignty. In many member states, citizens believe that EU membership reduces their ability to control internal policies, which amplifies reluctance towards a common European agenda. As a convenient narrative, populist Eurosceptic politicians fuel this suspicion about deeper European integration and divert election campaigns towards anti-governmental agendas (De Vries, 2007; Stoica, 2023).

In this context, European elections continue to be perceived as secondary (see Reif and Schmitt, 1980), as they fail to mobilize voters to the same extent as national elections. Low voter turnout and a lack of genuine interest in European issues can be interpreted as a gap between citizens and European institutions (see also Table 3). Ultimately, we can speak of the persistence of a gap in the process of European democratization, as citizens do not feel that their vote has a direct influence on EU policies (Franklin, 2011). The intergovernmental structure of the Union, which allows member states to retain considerable control over essential areas such as foreign and defence policy, supports the perception that the EU is an elitist and overly bureaucratic project rather than a participatory democratic union.

The Principle of Degressive Proportionality:

A Tolerable Compromise

A widely debated topic in recent decades has been the composition of the EP. The "federal at multiple levels" character of the EU (Härtel, 2012) has a shaping impact on European parliamentarism. A strict application of the principle of proportional representation would define the Union as a federal state in which the sovereignty of national states would be nullified. National and European political contingencies define the limits of the scope of action for European deputies.

During the Convention on the Future of Europe (2002–2003), a recurrent topic was discussed at every wave of EU enlargement: how many seats in the EP should be allocated to each member state. The debates over the minimum number of seats for each member state were particularly intense during the Intergovernmental

Conference (IGC) of 2003–2004. In the end, three main criteria were established: (a) each state must have a minimum of six seats, regardless of the size of the state; (b) the maximum threshold must not exceed 96 seats; and (c) the European Parliament will have a maximum of 750 seats (Ramírez González, 2010, p. 215). Of course, a minimum of six seats per state was advantageous for smaller member states, and the reform of the EP was part of a broader package of reforms that included, for example, reducing the number of commissioners and recalculating votes in the Council (Piris, 2010).

After the failure to adopt the Constitutional Treaty (2005), the issue of seat distribution in the EP remained unresolved. Until 2007, numerous normative and quantitative variants were attempted to balance representation in the EP. One such project was the 2007 Report by Alain Lamassoure and Adrian Severin, who, on behalf of the EP's Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO), drafted a project based on the so-called principle of degressive proportionality (see also Pukelsheim's analysis, 2010). The Committee, which adopted the three criteria from the Convention on the Future of Europe, explained in the "Explanatory Memorandum" of the Report that degressive proportionality was based on six principles that gave it "operational content":

- "a) the principle of efficiency – the EP could not function with more than a certain number of members (therefore the limitation to 750 is rational);
- b) the principle of national representation and motivation of voters – each Member State should have a minimum number of seats in order to send a relevant number of parliamentarians representing the national political main streams in the EP, thus stimulating the national citizens to participate in voting and consequently in the EU democratic process;

- c) the principle of European solidarity – following this principle, the more peopled states accept to get less seats than those which could be allocated to them by a strict application of full proportionality in order to let the less peopled states to get a better representation than that to which they would be entitled by the application of full proportionality;
 - d) the principle of the relative proportionality – the ratio population/number of seats is bigger the bigger the state is and respectively smaller the smaller the state is;
 - e) the principle of fair distribution – no state will have more seats than a bigger state or less seats than a smaller state;
 - f) the principle of the justified flexibility or of a flexible direct proportionality/degressivity – while observing the other principles, slight modifications of the number of seats could be agreed through a transparent procedure meant to bring as close as possible the differences between States in terms of population and in terms of seats. This should lead to an as linear curve as possible."
- (Lamassoure & Severin, 2007).

Thus, this principle was introduced to ensure balanced representation for both large and small member states. This principle aimed to prevent the potential domination of larger states while allowing smaller states to have a relevant position in the European legislative process. Through the application of degressive proportionality, although larger states receive more seats, smaller states are represented disproportionately by their population size. This approach represents a compromise between the international principle of equality among states and the federal-democratic principle, which is based on proportionality according to population size (Härtel, 2012).

This strategy was considered necessary to maintain the European Parliament's inclusion and legitimacy. On the other hand,

this method balances the need for proportional representation with practical considerations of legislative efficiency and fairness (Härtel, 2012).

Table 1. Evolution of the Number of Members of the European Parliament

Year	Number of Members	Details
1952	78	Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC)
1958	142	Parliamentary Assembly of the European Communities
1973	198	Accession of three states: United Kingdom, Denmark, and Ireland
1976	410	Increase prior to the 1979 elections
1981	434	Accession of one state: Greece
1986	518	Accession of two states: Portugal and Spain
1994	567	Reunification of Germany
1995	626	Accession of three states: Austria, Finland, and Sweden
2004	732	Accession of ten states: Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary
2007	785	Accession of two states: Bulgaria and Romania
2009	736	Adjustment for elections based on degressive proportionality
2011	754	Reconfiguration according to the Treaty of Lisbon
2013	766	Accession of one state: Croatia
2014	751	Reconfiguration for the 2014 elections and the Treaty of Lisbon
2019	705	United Kingdom's exit from the European Union
2024	720	Adjustment for elections based on degressive proportionality

However, the *Lamassoure-Severin approach* was not enthusiastically received by all states. During the Lisbon IGC (2007), Italy raised objections, considering that it received fewer seats than the United Kingdom and France. In the end, an additional seat was

offered to Italy, and the total maximum number of seats in the EP became 751 (Piris, 2010). Seemingly, this negotiation compromised the logic of degressive proportionality.

The practical implementation of degressive proportionality involves complex mathematical models and political negotiations. A notable proposal is the *Cambridge Compromise*, introduced in 2011, which suggested a base-plus-proportional method. According to this method, each member state would receive a fixed number of seats, with additional seats allocated proportionally to its population size. Although this distribution model was not adopted, the Cambridge Compromise is an example of ongoing attempts to identify more refined mechanisms for seat allocation in the EP to achieve a fair balance between large and small states (Grimmett et al., 2011).

During the 2014–2019 term, the allocation of seats in the EP was adjusted to account for demographic changes in the member states and to ensure compliance with the principle of degressive proportionality. In the same vein, for the 2024–2029 term, it was decided that the EP will have 720 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (European Council, 2023). This led to an increase of 15 seats compared to the previous term (2019–2024). These ongoing adjustments for each term align with the EU's commitment to maintaining proportional representation.

Different National Electoral Systems for Electing MEPs

Beyond the issue of the size of representation in the EP, another recurring topic since 1979 concerns the national electoral systems used to elect MEPs. According to the 1976 Electoral Act (as amended), which governs the elections, they must be based on the principle of

proportional representation, requiring that elections be conducted either through a list system or single transferable vote. Additionally, member states have the option to adopt a preferential list system, giving voters more flexibility in expressing their preferences (European Communities, 1976). Thus, MEPs are elected through direct universal suffrage, based on elections held at the national level in each of the EU's 27 member states every five years.

Table 2. *Electoral Systems and Variations Between Member States*

Electoral System	State	Description
Proportional Closed List	Spain, France, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, Sweden	Voters select a party list, and seats are allocated proportionally based on the party's vote share.
Mixed Proportional	Germany	Combines majoritarian and proportional representation with a 5% threshold for party representation.
Open List Proportional	Italy, Poland, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia	Voters can influence the order of candidates on a party list, with seats allocated proportionally based on the total votes received by each party.
Single Transferable Vote (STV)	Ireland, Malta	Voters rank candidates by preference, and seats are allocated through a quota system based on these preferences.

The electoral systems used by each member state vary depending on their respective political and historical contexts (see Table 2). In most states, proportional representation systems are used, aiming to increase the representativeness of the elections so that the distribution of seats closely mirrors the proportion of votes received

by each political party. This system also facilitates the inclusion of even smaller political parties (Farrell & Scully, 2007).

From this diversity emerges a polymorphic electoral system with different models of national electoral practices, varying between closed lists, where voters do not have the opportunity to alter the order of candidates, and open lists, which allow voters to express preferences for individual candidates. Similarly, the imposition of electoral thresholds between 2% and 5% serves to prevent excessive fragmentation of political representation (Marti & Maciejewski, 2024; see also Farrell & Scully, 2007 for uniformity in the European electoral system).

Voter Turnout in European Parliament Elections

Voter turnout in European Parliament elections has always been a topic of public and political debate. Despite concerns about the EU's democratic legitimacy, European elections have often seen lower turnout rates compared to national elections (Karp & Banducci, 2008). This comparison highlights the EU's limited capacity to cultivate a sense of European identity and engagement among its citizens (Flickinger & Studlar, 2007). All of this persists despite the EU's continuous efforts to increase voter turnout through initiatives aimed at raising public awareness about the importance of the European Parliament in the EU's institutional framework and its impact on daily life. Reforms have also been initiated to make the voting process more accessible to all EU citizens, regardless of where they are. For instance, the introduction of early voting, postal voting, and electronic voting in some member states aimed to reduce barriers to participation (Trechsel & Mendez, 2005).

This passive attitude of citizens toward European Parliament elections is often explained in academic literature through the term "second-order elections." Coined in 1980 in an analysis of the first direct universal suffrage election for the European Parliament in 1979, this phrase belongs to Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt (1980). The two authors introduced the idea that European Parliament elections are not seen as primary, essential elections that determine the formation of national governments or major shifts in European political direction. Instead, they are secondary elections and, therefore, provoke the same interest as national elections. Due to this "secondary" nature, European elections are more often viewed as an opportunity for voters to express their dissatisfaction with national governments without the risk of causing immediate and direct changes. As a result, governing parties in member states are often penalized at the ballot box during these elections, while opposition and smaller parties tend to benefit from greater support (Reif & Schmitt, 1980).

Therefore, European Parliament elections can have anti-government effects. Between 1979 and 2009, governing parties recorded significant losses in European Parliament elections, and this phenomenon was more pronounced when the European elections occurred a considerable time before national elections (Hix & Marsh, 2011). Thus, the further away European elections are from national elections, the higher the risk that voters' grievances and anti-government criticisms will manifest when electing members of the European Parliament, even if the political agendas differ.

However, voter behaviour is not solely reduced to a potential anti-government attitude. In addition to national considerations, there may also be a "pro-European" or "anti-European" vote

influencing the European Parliament elections. This perspective is relevant when we observe the political orientation of the vote. Until 2019, it can be said that there was relatively slight variation between the major European political families. Subsequently, the alternation between the European People's Party and Social Democrats was disrupted by the growing importance of new political formations, such as Renew Europe. This shift, once considered in the academic literature as the beginning of a broader European political consciousness (Hix & Marsh, 2011), became a striking reality starting in 2024, when European political representation revealed competition between pro-European and Euro-sceptic orientations (in all their forms of expression).

Finally, when we analyse the voting turnout dynamics of EU citizens (see Table 3), some observations made by Mark Franklin in 2007 remain partially relevant in 2024. The author noted a trend in countries participating for the first time in European Parliament elections to have higher voter turnout than in subsequent rounds of elections for the European Parliament. This could be explained by greater media coverage of such initial events. However, this hypothesis cannot be confirmed as a rule. Among the 13 states that joined after 2004, different voter behaviours can be observed. Estonia and Romania can be considered major exceptions in this situation. In its second round of European Parliament elections, Estonia had a participation rate of 1.64 compared to 2004.

Conversely, Romania increased its voter turnout between 2007 and 2024 with a rate of 1.78. Franklin's second observation (2007) shows that if European Parliament elections occur earlier in a national electoral cycle, voter turnout is invariably lower than if these European elections were scheduled closer to national elections.

Finally, a third finding highlighted in the literature is that in countries where voting is compulsory, turnout is significantly higher. The European average voter turnout has seen a constant decline as the EU expanded to include more member states where compulsory voting is not enforced (Franklin, 2007). However, the last two elections (2019 and 2024) indicate an apparent increase in the interest of EU citizens in European Parliament elections.

This increase can be explained by the radicalization of the European electoral discourse after member states had to face successive crises and European communication strategies struggled to maintain solidarity as the primary vector of crisis resolution policies.

Table 3. Voter Turnout in European Parliament Elections (1979–2019) in Different Member States (%)

Member State	1979	(1981) 1984	(1987) 1989	1994	(1995*/ 1996) 1999	2004	(2007) 2009	(2013) 2014	2019
Austria					(67.7) 49	42.4	46	45.4	59.8
Belgium	91.4	92.1	90.7	90.7	91	90.8	90.4	89.6	88.5
Bulgaria						(29.2) 38.9	35.8	30.8	
Croatia						(20.8) 25.2	29.9		
Cyprus						72.5	59.4	43.4	45
Czech Rep.						28.3	28.2	18.2	28.7
Denmark	47.8	52.4	46.2	52.9	50.4	47.9	59.5	56.3	66
Estonia						26.8	43.9	36.5	37.6
Finland					(57.6) 30.1	39.4	40.5	41	40.7
France	60.7	56.7	48.7	52.8	46.8	42.8	40.6	42.4	50.1

Member State	1979	(1981) 1984	(1987) 1989	1994	(1995*/ 1996) 1999	2004	(2007) 2009	(2013) 2014	2019
Germany	65.7	56.8	62.3	60	45.2	43	43.3	48.1	61.4
Greece		(78.6) 77.2	79.9	73.2	71.5	63.2	52.6	60	58.5
Hungary						38.5	36.3	29	43.4
Ireland	63.6	47.6	68.3	44	50.2	58.6	57.6	52.4	49.7
Italy	84.9	83.4	81	73.6	69.8	71.7	65.1	57.2	54.5
Latvia						41.3	53.7	30.2	33.6
Lithuania						48.4	21	47.4	53.1
Luxembourg	88.9	88.8	87.4	88.5	87.3	91.3	90.8	85.6	84.1
Malta						82.4	78.8	74.8	72.7
Netherlands	58.1	50.6	47.2	35.7	30	39.3	36.8	37.3	41.9
Poland						20.9	24.5	23.8	45.7
Portugal		(72.4) 51.2	35.5	39.9	38.6	36.8	33.7	31.4	
Romania					(29.5)	27.7	32.4	51.1	
Slovakia						17	19.6	13.1	22.7
Slovenia						28.4	28.3	24.6	28.3
Spain		(68.9)	54.6	59.1	63	45.1	44.9	43.8	64.3
Sweden				(41.6*)	38.8	37.9	45.5	51.1	54.7
United Kingdom	32.3	32.6	36.2	36.4	24	39.2	34.5	35.4	36.9
EU Average	67.2	65	62.8	58	52.5	46.5	45.2	43.3	48.8

The election results categorically determine the political configuration of the EP. The way elections define the composition of the EP has a significant impact on the balance of power between political groups and on the EP's legislative agenda (Katz & Wessels,

1999; Hix & Høyland, 2011). For example, the rise of Eurosceptic parties in the 2019 and 2024 elections introduced new dynamics in the EP, which posed a challenge to the traditional pro-European consensus. This new reality in the Brussels hemicycle has led to the creation of broader coalitions and more complex negotiations between pro-European parties to secure the necessary majorities for advancing European policies. In this logic, national political parties that are part of the same ideological families are now more interested in the results achieved by similar parties from other member states, not just in their individual success at the national level. It has become more evident that achieving a better percentage at the national level in the EP elections provides political parties with a double advantage: an increase in the number of seats their European political group obtains in the EP and a better negotiating position within the European political group. Ultimately, political groups hold the power to shape the political and legislative agenda of the European Parliament.

Political Groups

Another important aspect regarding the composition of the European Parliament is the role of political groups. Once a member is confirmed, they must choose between joining an existing political group or retaining the status of Non-Attached, acting independently.

Political groups are fundamental to the functioning of the European Parliament and the efficient conduct of the legislative process. They reflect the ideological diversity of the European Union and the balance of political power within the Parliament. MEPs organize themselves into political groups based on shared ideologies

and objectives beyond their national affiliations. According to the European Parliament's Rules of Procedure, each group must include at least 23 MEPs from at least one-quarter of the member states (European Parliament, 2024, Rule 33.2). This criterion guarantees the transnational nature of the groups and prevents political fragmentation along regional lines.

Political groups have the ability to shape the legislative agenda and facilitate decision-making in the Parliament. They coordinate debates, propose amendments, and develop voting strategies to influence the outcomes of legislative proposals. The leadership of each group, made up of presidents and vice presidents, works both with other groups and with parliamentary committees to negotiate compromises and build coalitions. These leaders participate in the Conference of Presidents, along with the President of the Parliament, to make decisions on legislative priorities and the Parliament's activities (see details in Hix & Lord, 1997; Olsen & McCormick, 2020).

Historically, the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) have been the largest and most influential groups in the Parliament. The EPP, founded in 1976, brings together Christian Democratic and conservative parties, advocating for economically liberal but socially conservative policies. In contrast, the S&D group, established in 1953, focuses on social justice, supporting workers' rights and progressive taxation (Hix & Lord, 1997; Nugent, 2017; Olsen & McCormick, 2020).

In recent years, the political landscape of the European Parliament has become more diverse with the rise of smaller groups and non-traditional parties. For example, Renew Europe, the successor

of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), has become a relevant force, advocating for market reforms and civil liberties. At the same time, the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), formed in 1999, has played a central role in promoting sustainability and decentralization policies (see also Mudde, 2024; Kritzinger et al., 2020).

On the other hand, Eurosceptic and sovereignist groups such as the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Patriots for Europe (PfE), and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) have gained ground in Parliament. In the 2024–2029 legislature, these groups represent about a quarter of the MEPs (see Table 4).

Table 4. Political Groups in the European Parliament (2024–2029)

Political Group	Abbrev.	Ideological Position	Year of Formation	Number of MEPs
European People's Party	EPP	Center-right, Christian Democrat	1976	188
Progressive Alliance of Socialists	S&D	Center-left, Social Democrat	1953	136
Patriots for Europe	PfE	Far-right Sovereignist	2024	84
European Conservatives and Reformists	ECR	Right-wing, Eurosceptic	2009	78
Renew Europe	RE	Centrist, Liberal	2019	77
Greens/European Free Alliance	Greens/EFA	Left-wing, Ecologist, Regionalist	1999	53
The Left	The Left	Moderate Left Eurosceptic	1995	46
Europe of Sovereign Nations	ESN	Far-right Sovereignist	2024	25

Source: European Parliamentary Research Service. (2024).

These groups challenge the pro-European consensus, advocating for priorities such as national sovereignty and stricter controls on immigration. Their rise has altered the dynamics of negotiations, forcing pro-European groups to form more complex coalitions to secure the majorities necessary for adopting key policies.

Political groups play a central role in the organization of European Parliament committees, which are the main bodies responsible for drafting legislation and overseeing European policy proposals. Each committee is composed of MEPs from various political groups, reflecting the overall political balance in the Parliament. The allocation of committee chairmanships and the designation of rapporteurs, two key positions that influence legislative outcomes, are subject to negotiations between groups, considering their size and influence. These negotiations require constant dialogue and cooperation between groups to balance political interests, with the goal of ensuring efficient legislative functioning (Hix & Lord, 1997; Lindberg et al., 2008).

Thus, political groups' cohesion and internal discipline become critical elements for their efficiency in the European Parliament. Group leadership utilizes formal and informal mechanisms to maintain unity, including regular meetings to coordinate positions, voting discipline systems, and the distribution of key positions and resources, all aimed at rewarding MEP loyalty. However, the transnational nature of political groups can also generate challenges, as divergent national interests and ideological differences may lead to internal conflicts and factionalism (McElroy & Benoit, 2007; Kreppel, 2002).

The interaction between political groups and other European Union institutions, such as the European Commission and the

Council of the European Union, is an integral part of the dynamics of European parliamentary governance. Political groups actively engage in dialogues and negotiations with these institutions to influence EU policies and legislation. Acting as intermediaries between the European Parliament and other actors involved in the policymaking process, they play a pivotal role in the ordinary legislative procedure. Hence, the importance of group leaders' activities is why national parties seek strong representation within these groups.

Through their active role in monitoring the European Commission's activities, these groups possess what is referred to as "access to legislative influence," as their power to evaluate the Commission allows them to challenge its actions when deemed inadequate (Kreppel, 2002).

Political groups are essential in the European Parliament because they ensure transparency and accountability in EU governance. These groups monitor and challenge executive actions, extending their oversight over other European institutions in a constant effort to promote democratic accountability at the supranational level (Rittberger, 2014, p. 1175). Their oversight activities help maintain the balance of power and prevent authoritarian tendencies within the European Union.

Political groups' influence also extends to the appointment of senior officials in the European Union, such as the President of the European Central Bank, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and other important positions. These groups negotiate and form coalitions to support or oppose candidates for these positions in line with their strategic priorities and ideological orientations.

MEPs who are not affiliated with a political group have a much more limited impact on EU policies, given the restrictive framework imposed by the Rules of Procedure. Their capacity to significantly influence political decisions is limited due to their exclusion from negotiation forums.

Institutional Structure

The second dimension considered in explaining the activities of MEPs is the institutional structure of the European Parliament. The highly complex and sophisticated system that has developed over decades of evolution challenges MEPs to find the tools and mechanisms to make their voices heard. We have observed the overwhelming role played by political groups in shaping MEPs' behaviour and determining the actions of the EP. However, they represent only the support function. Parliamentary committees and plenary sessions are the actual arenas that voters most often observe. The political support an MEP gains from their group helps them demonstrate their parliamentary value at the European level. A MEP's negotiation skills must be demonstrated both within the political group and in committees and plenary sessions. Otherwise, it is merely rhetoric without results.

Leadership and Committees

The leadership of the European Parliament includes the President, Vice-Presidents, and the Conference of Presidents. The President of Parliament is elected by MEPs for a two-and-a-half-year term (see Table 5). The President's responsibilities are not limited to

ceremonial duties but extend to representing Parliament in inter-institutional negotiations, overseeing parliamentary sessions, and ensuring the observance of parliamentary rules and procedures (Corbett et al., 2016). The election of the President is a highly important political process, reflecting the balance of power between the political groups within the European Parliament.

Table 5. Chronological List of Presidents of the European Parliament (1952–2024)

Term	President	Country	Political Group
1952–1954	Paul-Henri Spaak	Belgium	Socialist
1954–1956	Alcide De Gasperi	Italy	Christian Democrat
1956–1958	Robert Schuman	France	Christian Democrat
1958–1960	Hans Furler	West Germany	Christian Democrat
1960–1962	Jean Duvieusart	Belgium	Christian Democrat
1962–1964	Gaetano Martino	Italy	Liberal
1964–1966	Victor Leemans	Belgium	Christian Democrat
1966–1969	Alain Poher	France	Christian Democrat
1969–1971	Mario Scelba	Italy	Christian Democrat
1971–1973	Walter Behrendt	West Germany	Socialist
1973–1975	Cornelis Berkhouwer	Netherlands	Liberal
1975–1977	Georges Spénale	France	Socialist
1977–1979	Emilio Colombo	Italy	Christian Democrat
1979–1982	Simone Veil	France	Liberal
1982–1984	Piet Dankert	Netherlands	Socialist
1984–1987	Pierre Pflimlin	France	Christian Democrat
1987–1989	Lord Henry Plumb	United Kingdom	Conservative
1989–1992	Enrique Barón Crespo	Spain	Socialist
1992–1994	Egon Klepsch	Germany	Christian Democrat
1994–1997	Klaus Hänsch	Germany	Socialist
1997–1999	José María Gil-Robles	Spain	Christian Democrat

Term	President	Country	Political Group
1999–2002	Nicole Fontaine	France	Christian Democrat
2002–2004	Pat Cox	Ireland	Liberal
2004–2007	Josep Borrell	Spain	Socialist
2007–2009	Hans-Gert Pöttering	Germany	Christian Democrat
2009–2012	Jerzy Buzek	Poland	Christian Democrat
2012–2017	Martin Schulz	Germany	Socialist
2017–2019	Antonio Tajani	Italy	Christian Democrat
2019–2022	David Sassoli	Italy	Socialist
2022–2024	Roberta Metsola	Malta	Christian Democrat
2024–2027	Roberta Metsola	Malta	Christian Democrat

The European Parliament appoints 14 vice-presidents who support the President in fulfilling their Treaty-assigned duties. Each vice-president has specific responsibilities, such as presiding over sessions in the President's absence, overseeing administrative functions, and representing the Parliament at various official events. The distribution of these 14 positions involves sophisticated political negotiations aimed at ensuring the representation of various political factions, thus promoting a more inclusive governance model that reflects the dynamic political balance within the institution (Nugent, 2017; Olsen & McCormick, 2020).

The Conference of Presidents plays a crucial role in setting the legislative agenda, allocating speaking time during plenary sessions, and overseeing the composition of committees and delegations. This body includes the President of the Parliament and the leaders of all political groups actively participating in political negotiation and consensus-building. The power and influence exercised by the Conference of Presidents over legislative priorities can vary

depending on the evolution of political coalitions and strategic alliances. This dynamic becomes particularly evident during the formation of new legislatures when political groups attempt to assert their positions and influence (Hix & Høyland, 2011).

The legislative function of the European Parliament is primarily carried out through the work conducted in parliamentary committees. The Parliament has 20 standing committees, each specializing in distinct public policy areas such as foreign affairs, economic and monetary affairs, and environmental issues. These committees meet in Brussels and include members of Parliament from various political groups, generally reflecting the political proportions of the entire institution. The chairs of these committees are appointed according to the political distribution in Parliament and exercise considerable influence over setting the legislative agenda within the committees (Raunio, 1999; Whitaker, 2011).

Table 6. *Committee System of the European Parliament*

Committee Type	Primary Responsibilities	Key Roles	Influence
Standing Committees (20)	Specialize in policy areas (e.g., foreign affairs, economic issues); conduct detailed review of legislative proposals.	Committee Chairs, Rapporteurs	Draft reports, propose amendments, negotiate compromises.
Special Committees	Address specific issues or temporary tasks not covered by standing committees.	Appointed by EP	Conduct in-depth investigations, provide recommendations.
Petitions Committee	Reviews petitions submitted by EU citizens; monitors the implementation of EU legislation.	Appointed by EP	Ensures citizens' concerns are addressed, oversees the enforcement of EU laws.

The European Parliament's committees appoint rapporteurs to draft detailed reports on legislative proposals coming from the European Commission. Through these reports, they have the ability to shape the course of debates as they propose and collect amendments to the European Commission's text, which they then negotiate piece by piece to reach compromises between political groups. The role of rapporteurs is particularly important, as their reports form the basis of deliberations and final decisions, both at the committee level and in the plenary sessions of the European Parliament. The selection of rapporteurs is a complex and strategic process influenced by two main factors: expertise and political prestige. Generally, rapporteurs are chosen from among Members of the European Parliament who have worked in the relevant field and who have gained in-depth knowledge of the sector, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to the efficient resolution of the files they handle. Ultimately, the goal is to increase the legitimacy of the committee's outcomes and gain the trust of other members not directly involved. Each political group has a system for allocating rapporteur positions based on the size of the group and the importance of the legislative file through a points-based mechanism that allows smaller groups to accumulate points to bid on high-visibility European topics. This process ensures balanced representation between national delegations and political groups (Neuhold, 2001).

Parliamentary committees are not limited to the legislative dimension; they also function as oversight bodies for the European Commission and other EU institutions, ensuring transparency and adherence to legislative intentions. The exercise of this oversight competence has the potential to increase the European executive's

accountability and maintain democratic control over the implementation of European policies (Olsen & McCormick, 2020).

Plenary Sessions

The plenary sessions of the European Parliament represent the most visible moments from a media exposure perspective, holding significant importance in the decision-making process of the European Union. Unlike national parliaments, where competition between the government and opposition is well-defined, the plenary sessions of the European Parliament function more as a public forum for debates and collective decision-making. These sessions, held alternately in Brussels and Strasbourg, are structured to cover a wide range of topics according to an agenda set by the Conference of Presidents (Hix & Høyland, 2011; Olsen & McCormick, 2020). The ability of political groups to influence the setting of this agenda is a key power tool in the European Parliament, allowing them to steer legislative debates in line with their priorities.

The debates in plenary sessions are carefully organized, with speaking time for MEPs allocated based on the size of each political group and the relevance of the topic being discussed. Every Member of the European Parliament has the right to speak in any of the 24 official languages, supported by the Parliament's translation services. These debates reflect the complex dynamics of power and alliances within the Parliament, where political groups seek to assert their positions and influence legislative outcomes (Ringe, 2010). Although formal rules govern speaking time and the order of debates, the content of these discussions often reveals major political conflicts that manifest at the EU level.

A typical legislative debate begins with an introductory statement from the European Commission, followed by the presentation of the report prepared by the rapporteur from the relevant committee in the European Parliament. If necessary, rapporteurs from other committees present their views as well. Subsequently, the general debate follows, where each political group expresses its position, with the order of interventions determined by the size of each group, starting with the largest political group. The structure of these debates is designed to ensure balance and strict organization, with each intervention regularly limited to a maximum of three minutes. This time constraint encourages clarity and conciseness in the speeches of MEPs while ensuring the efficiency of the debates (Proksch & Slapin, 2010).

Forming alliances and strategic coalitions is a key feature of plenary sessions. Political groups must collaborate to secure the majorities necessary to pass legislation. These coalitions are often fluid, varying depending on the topic and the interests of the groups involved. Coalition-building fosters compromise and consensus, contributing to a more collaborative and efficient legislative environment (Hix et al., 2007). The legislative outcomes typically reflect complex negotiations, where concessions are made to harmonize different perspectives and interests.

Plenary sessions, with significantly higher media visibility than committee meetings, also serve as a platform for expressing political positions. MEPs publicly present their stances, both to their electoral constituencies and to the broader public. Debates and votes on important issues attract considerable media attention, providing political groups and MEPs with visibility and the opportunity to

communicate their positions on key European Union issues (Hix et al., 2007; Neuhold, 2001).

Frequent dialogues with the European Commission and the Council of the European Union demonstrate the European Parliament's status in the EU decision-making process. Representatives of these institutions participate in plenary debates and respond to questions posed by MEPs, reinforcing the Parliament's role as a co-legislator alongside the Council. This ability to directly influence legislation through inter-institutional debates is a gain achieved by the Parliament through successive EU treaties after decades of limited impact on European policies (Nugent, 2017; Olsen & McCormick, 2020).

The Legislative Process as a Shaper of Member of the European Parliament

From this study, it is evident that the European Parliament holds a complex range of functions and powers that position it at the centre of European Union governance. These powers, as defined by the founding treaties of the EU (most recently by the Treaty of Lisbon), include legislative, budgetary, oversight, and international relations duties. Each of these is the result of the European Parliament's long evolution in the Union's decision-making process.

In the legislative sphere, the Parliament has become a co-legislator, sharing responsibility with the Council of the European Union under the ordinary legislative procedure. Through this procedure, the EP could amend, approve, or reject legislative proposals initiated by the European Commission. Parliamentary committees

and rapporteurs play a key role in this process, influencing political dynamics and negotiating necessary compromises (Hix & Høyland, 2011). Additionally, the Parliament has the power to approve international agreements, ensuring that they align with the strategic values of the Union (Hill & Smith, 2005).

Through its budgetary authority, the EP can directly influence the Union's financial allocations (see also Todorescu, 2024). The Treaty of Lisbon strengthened the EP's role in this process, establishing a balance of power with the Council. The Parliament has the right to reject the entire budget, and this leverage is crucial in imposing revisions aligned with its political priorities (Lindner, 2006). Budgetary oversight is reinforced through the discharge procedure, which allows the EP to monitor the efficient use of European funds (Busuioc, 2013).

In its oversight competencies, the Parliament plays a vital role in maintaining democratic accountability within the EU. Through the power to approve the appointments of the President of the Commission and commissioners, the Parliament can influence the composition and direction of the Commission (Neuhold, 2001; Härtel, 2012). The EP also exercises constant oversight through question sessions and hearings, compelling the Commission to remain transparent and accountable to European citizens.

In international relations, the EP ensures that the Union's foreign policies uphold democratic values and human rights (see also Popa, 2024). It also actively monitors the implementation of international agreements and exercises significant control over the EU's trade and foreign policy (Hill & Smith, 2005). The Parliament is involved in responding to international crises, playing a crucial

role in formulating the EU's strategic reactions (Schimmelfennig & Thomas, 2012).

All these attributes define the EP's scope of action and, by extension, that of its members. Therefore, the third primary dimension shaping the activities of MEPs is determined by the legislative process within the EP. From the initiation of a legislative proposal to the detailed analysis carried out in committees, debates, and plenary votes, as well as subsequent negotiations with the Council of the European Union, all these phases require active involvement from MEPs. Constant political negotiations, both between political groups in the EP and between Parliament and other EU institutions, often highlight the inherent tensions between member states' interests and those of the Union.

The legislative process generally begins with a proposal from the European Commission, which holds exclusive competence to initiate legislation in most areas (Craig & Burca, 2011). In Parliament, the document is referred to a specialized committee, which becomes responsible for its detailed examination. The decision on which committee will analyse the proposal is based on its nature and the expertise of the committee members (see details in Corbett et al., 2016; Craig & Burca, 2011; Nugent, 2017). The importance of the rapporteur in the committee was discussed in a previous section.

The detailed analysis conducted by the parliamentary committee is an essential step in shaping the final form of the legislative act. The lead committee may hold hearings with experts, consult stakeholders, and engage directly with European Commission representatives to gain a clearer understanding of the proposal's implications for EU policies (Raunio, 1999). The rapporteur appointed by the committee drafts a report that may include

proposed amendments, becoming the main document on which the debates and votes in the EP plenary will be based (Neuhold, 2001).

Negotiations within the lead committee are often intense, requiring compromises between various political groups. In the end, the committee presents a report that includes both the final text of the proposal and any necessary amendments, as negotiated by the political groups represented in the committee.

Once the lead committee finalizes its report, the legislative proposal is brought before the European Parliament's plenary, where debates and voting take place. At this stage, the plenary debate becomes a platform for discussing the political implications of the proposal. MEPs express their views on the draft law, discussing its advantages and potential issues, and may even propose new amendments (Ringe, 2010). The plenary vote determines whether the proposal will proceed or needs revision.

If the Parliament approves the proposal, negotiations with the Council of the European Union follow under the ordinary legislative procedure. Both the Parliament and the Council must agree on the final form of the law. These negotiations often involve informal tripartite meetings, known as *trilogues*, with representatives from Parliament, the Council, and the European Commission, to clarify points of divergence and reach a compromise (Neuhold, 2001; Olsen & McCormick, 2020).

The trilogue process highlights the complex interactions between the EU institutions and how political power is expressed through strategy. The Parliament seeks to influence the final outcome, relying on negotiation strategy, the cohesion of its delegation, and its ability to build effective alliances with other institutions

(Tsebelis & Garrett, 1997). Successful negotiations produce a compromise text that both the Parliament and the Council must then approve.

The legislative process continues after the legislation is adopted. After this stage, the European Parliament remains involved through its oversight function, ensuring that the legislation is implemented effectively. Parliament's committees monitor the implementation of legislative acts, hold hearings with officials, and request reports from the European Commission. This oversight aims to ensure that the legislation is applied efficiently and in accordance with the objectives set (Nugent, 2017).

Throughout this lengthy and sophisticated process, the expertise and negotiation skills of MEPs are essential. These are the main drivers of an efficient legislative process through which the EP maintains its political legitimacy in relation to the other institutions of the European Union.

Final Remarks

Even though the European Parliament somewhat follows certain parliamentary law traditions, it is not a plenary debate parliament but rather a working parliament, where the majority of activities take place in committees (Härtel, 2012). Nevertheless, the consolidation of the EP's role in the institutional architecture of the European Union provides this organization with a democratic foundation for the development of the European integration process. Member states benefit, at the governmental level, from the respect of the international principle of equality, which implicitly acknowledges

national sovereignty. The construction of the European Union was not achieved through the cession of sovereignty but through the decision of states to pool their sovereignties, committing to loyal and equitable participation and contribution to the process of economic integration.

In this process, the citizen has become the main actor, and the philosophy of post-Maastricht integration has placed the axiom of the European Union citizen as the final beneficiary of common policies supporting the development of the fundamental freedoms of the Internal Market at the foundation of the European construction. Direct citizen participation in the process of European integration does not undermine sovereign states but rather enhances the degree of democratization, which is unprecedented in the evolution of any international organization.

Nevertheless, the EP faces major challenges in terms of representation, which profoundly affect its legitimacy and effectiveness. These challenges stem from structural issues within the EU's electoral framework and the broader socio-political dynamics that affect voter engagement and participation. One issue of representation is the principle of degressive proportionality, which governs the allocation of seats in the EP. This principle raises legitimate questions regarding equality in representation. The disparities created by this system may undermine the perceived fairness of the electoral process, potentially eroding trust in the EP's ability to represent all EU citizens equitably.

Additionally, the EP's electoral system varies significantly across member states, highlighting an inconsistency that complicates efforts to create a coherent and uniform electoral system that could enhance the EP's democratic legitimacy. The issue of voter turnout

must also be integrated into this paradigm. Low voter turnout undermines the EP's claim to democratic legitimacy, as it suggests a lack of engagement and interest among EU citizens in the legislative processes that directly affect them. This disengagement may be exacerbated by the complexity of EU governance and a perceived disconnect between the EP and citizens' daily concerns.

The representation of political and gender diversity within the EP also presents challenges. While the EP is designed to reflect a broad range of political ideologies through its political groups, the real influence of smaller parties may be limited. The dominance of larger political groups often marginalizes smaller parties and minority voices, neglecting significant segments of the electorate. On the other hand, despite efforts to promote gender equality, women remain underrepresented in the EP relative to their proportion in the general population. Initiatives such as gender quotas have had some success, but disparities persist, particularly in leadership positions within the Parliament (Horst et al., 2022).

These reforms could be more easily achieved through a better understanding of the EP's duties and functions, both by the European electorate and by the political class at the member state level. The first step is clarifying the difference between the EP and national parliaments to mitigate the syndrome of secondary elections. The second step could involve citizens' engagement in the European political debate, not only during electoral campaigns but especially throughout the EP's legislative term. In this case, the MEP, in addition to the solid expertise that supports their parliamentary activity, needs political creativity in their dialogue with the electorate to engage them through consultations and citizen initiatives in influencing the European agenda.

References

- Abril Marti, P., & Maciejewski, M. (2024). *The European Parliament: Electoral procedures*. European Parliament. Retrieved from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/21/the-european-parliament-electoral-procedures>
- Alexandrescu, M. (2023). European Union Citizenship and Its Avatars. In Alexandrescu, M. (ed.) *Citizens of the European Union: status, identity and beyond*. Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, pp. 13–37.
- Biondi, A., Eeckhout, P., & Ripley, S. (Eds.). (2012). *EU Law After Lisbon*. Oxford University Press.
- Boomgaarden, H. G., Schuck, A. R., Elenbaas, M., & de Vreese, C. H. (2011). The impact of news coverage on public perceptions of the European Union and European integration. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 49(3), 435–456.
- Brandsma, G. J. (2019). Transparency of EU informal trilogues through public feedback in the European Parliament: promise unfulfilled. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 26(10), 1464–1483. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1572217>
- Busuioc, M. (2013). *European Agencies: Law and Practices of Accountability*. Oxford University Press.
- Christiansen, T. (2016). After the Spitzenkandidaten: fundamental change in the EU's political system? *West European Politics*, 39(5), 992–1010. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2016.1184414>
- European Council. (2023). European Council Decision (EU) 2023/2061 of 22 September 2023 establishing the composition of the European Parliament. Official Journal of the European Union.
- Corbett, R., Jacobs, F. G., Jacobs, F., & Neville, D. (2016). *The European Parliament* (9th ed.). John Harper Publishing
- Craig, P., & De Búrca, G. (2015). *EU Law: Text, Cases, and Materials* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press
- De Vries, C. E. (2007). Sleeping giant: Fact or fairytale? How European integration affects national elections. *European Union Politics*, 8(3), 363–385.
- Dinan, D. (2005). *Ever closer union: an introduction to European integration*. Third Edition, Palgrave

- European Communities. (1976). *Act concerning the election of the representatives of the Assembly by direct universal suffrage*. Official Journal of the European Communities, L 278, 5–11. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A41976X1008%2801%29>
- European Parliament. (2024). *Rules of Procedure (10th parliamentary term, July 2024)*. European Parliament. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/compendium/en/contents.html>
- European Parliamentary Research Service. (2024). Size of political groups in the European Parliament. *European Parliamentary Research Service*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/762357/EPRS_ATA\(2024\)762357_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/762357/EPRS_ATA(2024)762357_EN.pdf)
- Farrell, D. M., & Scully, R. (2010). Representing Europe's citizens? Electoral institutions and the failure of parliamentary representation. Oxford University Press.
- Fischer, J. (2000, May 12). *From confederacy to federation: Thoughts on the finality of European integration* [Speech]. Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany. Auswärtiges Amt. https://www.cvce.eu/obj/speech_by_joschka_fischer_on_the_ultimate_objective_of_european_integration_berlin_12_may_2000-en-4cd02fa7-d9d0-4cd2-91c9-2746a3297773
- Flickinger, R. S., & Studlar, D. T. (2007). One Europe, Many Electorates? *Comparative Political Studies*, 40(4), 383–404. Doi:10.1177/0010414006288970
- Franklin, M. N. (2004). *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945*. Cambridge University Press.
- Franklin, M. N. (2011). European elections and the European voter. *The Oxford Handbook of European Union Politics*, 7, 69–92.
- Franklin, M. N., Hobolt, S. B., & de Vries, C. E. (2011). The dynamics of voter turnout in the European Parliament elections 2009. *European Union Politics*, 12(3), 241–262. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116511404611>
- Grimmett, G. (2011). Degressive Proportionality: What It Means and How It Works. *Mathematical Social Sciences*, 61(1), 20–30.
- Härtel, I. (2012). Zuwachsende Legitimität: Institutionen und Verfahren der Rechtsetzung in der föderalen Europäischen Union. In W. Weidenfeld & I. Härtel (Eds.), *Handbuch Föderalismus: Föderalismus als demokratische Rechtsordnung und Rechtskultur in Deutschland, Europa und der Welt: Band IV: Föderalismus in Europa und der Welt* (pp. 317–387). Springer-Verlag.

- Hill, C. & Smith, M. (2005). *International Relations and the European Union*. (edited by). Oxford University Press.
- Hix, S., & Høyland, B. (2011). *The Political System of the European Union* (3rd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hix, S., & Lord, C. (1997). *Political Parties in the European Union*. Macmillan Press.
- Hix, S., & Marsh, M. (2011). Second-order effects plus pan-European political swings: An analysis of European Parliament elections across time. *Electoral Studies*, 30(1), 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2010.09.017>
- Hix, S., Noury, A. G., & Roland, G. (2018). *Democratic politics in the European Parliament* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Hix, S., Noury, A., & Roland, G. (2007). *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hobolt, S. B. (2012). Citizen Satisfaction with Democracy in the European Union. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 50(S1), 88–105
- Hobolt, S. B. (2014). A vote for the President? The role of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21(10), 1528–1540.
- Hobolt, S. B., & Wittrock, J. (2011). The second-order election model revisited: An experimental test of vote choices in European Parliament elections. *Electoral Studies*, 30(1), 29–40.
- Horst, C., Dao, S., Geertsen, P., Rahman, S., & Tucker, M. (2022). *More representation but not influence: Women in the European Parliament*. *International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics*. Retrieved from <https://www.iknowpolitics.org/en/learn/knowledge-resources/more-representation-not-influence-women-european-parliament>
- Kantola, J., & Rolandsen Agustín, L. (2016). Gendering transnational party politics: The case of the European Union. *Party Politics*, 22(5), 641–651. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068816655565>
- Karp, J. A., & Banducci, S. A. (2008). Political Efficacy and Participation in Twenty-Seven Democracies: How Electoral Systems Shape Political Behaviour. *British Journal of Political Science*, 38(02). Doi:10.1017/s0007123408000161
- Kostelka, F., Blais, A., & Gidengil, E. (2019). Has the European Parliament increased voter turnout? *European Union Politics*, 20(1), 63–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116518816033>

- Kreppel, A. (2002). *The European Parliament and Supranational Party System: A Study in Institutional Development*. Cambridge University Press
- Kritzinger, S., Plescia, C., Raube, K., Wilhelm, J., & Wouters, J. (2020). *Assessing the 2019 European Parliament elections*. Routledge.
- Lamassoure, A., & Severin, A. (2007). *Report on the Composition of the European Parliament (2007/2169(INI)) (Final A6-0351/2007)*. European Parliament, Committee on Constitutional Affairs. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-6-2007-0351_EN.html
- Lindberg, B., Rasmussen, A. And Warntjen, A. (2008) 'Party politics as usual? The role of political parties in EU legislative decision-making', *Journal of European Public Policy* 15(8): 1107– 26.
- Mudde, C. (2024). The far right and the 2024 European elections. *Intereconomics*, 59(2), 61–65. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ie-2024-0014>
- Neuhold, C. (2001). The Legislative Backbone keeping the Institution upright? The Role of European Parliament Committees in the EU Policy-Making Process. *European Integration Online Papers* (EIOP). 5(10).
- Nugent, N. (2017). *The Government and Politics of the European Union*. Red Globe Press; Macmillan Education UK
- Olsen, J., & McCormick, J. (2020). *The European Union: politics and policies* (Seventh edition). Routledge.
- Peterson, J., & Shackleton, M. (2012). *The Institutions of the European Union* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Piris, J.-C. (2010). *The Lisbon Treaty: A Legal and Political Analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Popa, P. (2023). Stateless persons and third-country nationals shaping EU's citizenship policies. In Alexandrescu, M. (ed.). *Citizens of the European Union: status, identity and beyond*. (Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană. pp. 67–92.
- Popa, P. (2024). Rolul internațional al Parlamentului European în promovarea și protejarea drepturilor omului. In Alexandrescu, M. (ed.) *Parlamentul European: între alegere și acțiune*. Presa Universitară Clujeană, pp. 59–97.
- Proksch, S.-O., & Slapin, J. B. (2010). Position taking in European Parliament speeches. *British Journal of Political Science*, 40(3), 587–611.
- Proksch, S.-O., & Slapin, J. B. (2010). Position taking in European Parliament speeches. *British Journal of Political Science*, 40(3), 587–611.

- Pukelsheim, F. (2010). Putting Citizens First: Representation and Power in the European Union. In Cichocki, M. A. & Zyczkowski, K. (eds.) *Institutional Design and Voting Power in the European Union*. (pp. 235–254) Ashgate.
- Ramírez González, V. (2010). Degressive Proportionality: Composition of the European Parliament. The Parabolic Method. In Cichocki, M. A. & Zyczkowski, K. (eds.) *Institutional Design and Voting Power in the European Union*. (pp. 215–234) Ashgate.
- Raunio, T. (1997). The European Perspective: Transnational Party Groups in the 1989–1994 European Parliament. Ashgate.
- Ringe, N. (2010). Who Decides, and How? Preferences, Uncertainty, and Policy Choice in the European Parliament. Oxford University Press.
- Rittberger, B. (2014). Institutionalizing representative democracy in the European Union: The case of the European Parliament. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 52(6). pp. 1174–1183. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12185>
- Schimmelfennig, F. & Thomas, D. C. (2011). Normative Institutionalism and EU Foreign Policy in Comparative Perspective. In Thomas, Daniel C. (Ed.). *Making EU Foreign Policy: National Preferences, European Norms and Common Policies*. Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 177–191.
- Schimmelfennig, F., & Sedelmeier, U. (2018). The Politics of European Union Enlargement: Theoretical Approaches. Routledge.
- Schmitt, H., & Thomassen, J. (2009). The European party system after enlargement. *Journal of European Integration*, 31(5), 569–587. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036330903145886>
- Scholten, P., & van der Veen, A. M. (2018). E-democracy in the European Union: Looking forward. *European Politics and Society*, 19(4), 404–419. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2018.1446795>
- Stoica, M.S. (2023). European Identity in the Proximity of War. Assessing Support for Eurosceptic Populism in Romania. In Alexandrescu, M. (ed.). *Citizens of the European Union: status, identity and beyond*. (Ed. Presa Universitară Clujeană, pp. 127–143
- Trechsel, A. H., & Mendez, F. (2005). The European Union and e-voting: Addressing the European Parliament's Internet voting challenge. European University Institute.
- Tsebelis, G., & Garrett, G. (2000). Legislative Politics in the European Union. *European Union Politics*, 1(1), pp. 9–36.

- van der Eijk, C., & Franklin, M. N. (2004). Potential for contestation on European matters at national elections in Europe. In G. Marks & M. Steenbergen (Eds.), *European integration and political conflict*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wallace, H., Pollack, M. & Young, A. (2014). *Policy-Making in the European Union*. Oxford University Press.
- Whitaker, R. (2011). The European Parliament's Committees: National Party Influence and Legislative Empowerment. Routledge
- Winzen, T. (2011). Technical or political? An exploration of the work of officials in the committees of the European Parliament. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 17(1), 27–44.

European Parliament's International Role in Promoting and Protecting Human Rights

*Paul POPA**

Pioneer and Pillar for Human Rights

Human rights have positioned themselves at the centre of EU policies, becoming a landmark in the development of the political agenda of the Member States. Challenges within the European Union, through which human rights are respected or violated by the Member States, are carefully evaluated and sanctioned by Union instruments. A thick legislation and a complex system of institutions have the mission of constantly monitoring the way in which human rights are protected. In this sense, the European Union has become a model of constant evolution in promoting human rights, with its main institutions actively protecting fundamental rights. Even the refugee crisis of recent years, determined by the Arab Spring or the conflict in Ukraine, demonstrated the seriousness with which the European Union assumed the fundamental protection of human rights despite the political imbalance caused internally.

* Dr. Paul Popa is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of International Studies and Contemporary History of the Faculty of History and Philosophy (Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2872-8167>

Among the main institutions of the European Union, in recent years, the European Parliament, as the pillar of the EU's democracy, has gained more and more influence in establishing and modifying the internal agenda of the Union, but especially that of the Member States. Having a firm position regarding some Member States, such as the case of Poland (European Parliament, 2016) or Hungary (European Parliament, 2024a), in which the policies regarding fundamental rights were evaluated negatively, the European Parliament assumed, under the prerogatives of the Treaty of Lisbon, an increasingly active role in assessing the protection of human rights outside the European Union. The European Parliament has become a "strong voice" both in terms of the negotiation policies regarding accession to the European Union but also for other non-candidate states, imposing balance, predictability and coherence between the protection of fundamental rights and the interests outlined around economic policies.

The position of the European Parliament in the assessment of human rights in third countries must be evaluated since its active role assumed in the protection of fundamental rights influences the positions of the other Union institutions in establishing or modifying relations with them. With an undisputed role at the Union level, the Parliament has firmly positioned itself in foreign policy through its own mechanisms. This article wants to present the main instruments used by the European Parliament in the protection of human rights outside the European Union, but also to analyse what are the effects, mainly legal, of the EP positions, especially regarding the situation of non-binding resolutions, and how they can create limitations and constraints in the political agendas of negotiation between the EU and third countries.

The importance of this external role of the Parliament is caused precisely by the model it manages to impose compared to other types of national legislation, but especially the creation of specific frameworks for the promotion and protection of human rights in states where this tradition does not exist, the EP succeeding, thus, to stand out as a genuine international actor in the protection of fundamental rights, and through the political and economic effects it creates to surpass numerous other international institutions and organisations with a role of recommendation and supervision.

Literature Review and Main Analysis Framework

Initially, the European Parliament, as the Joint Assembly of the Treaty since 1952, was considered a “checking and controlling, not decision-making institution.” However, with many limited powers over decades, unlike the national Parliaments, the EP proved very concerned with using the prerogatives granted to the maximum (Neunreither, 2000).

The process of European integration, the role of the institutions, and especially the position of the European Parliament have been analysed by specialised literature that takes into account political, sociological, anthropological, and economic criteria etc. Nevertheless, as the Parliament’s role within the European Union strengthened, its internationalisation ability was noticed. Some authors note how the Parliament succeeded in this internationalisation process on several levels, developing, especially after the

Treaty of Lisbon, into an actor with a strong international voice which does not limit its subjects of analysis and decision. From clear positions on the democratisation or legitimisation processes to crisis management and nuclear non-proliferation. An analysis of the EU parliamentarianism needs to be subjected to reflection by scholars, not only because it calls attention to the need for constant evaluation of political legitimacy on the stage of international relations, but because it ends up playing a vital role in the globalisation–regionalisation–decentralisation triangle (Irrera, 2015, pp. 2–3).

The mainstream humanist trends appeared after the Second World War, when the leading international organisations, the UNGA-UNU or the Council of Europe, had limited decision-making powers, so they focused their attention on the development of the protection of human rights. Since more than half of the member states, for example, in the UNGA, were from Europe, human rights were seen as a European identity value. Likewise, the European Communities wanted to highlight the central role in creating an image around protecting human dignity, with the European Parliament wanting to be its expression. Concerning this post-war civilian power ideology, the European Parliament not only had the opportunity to consolidate this European identity but also had the obligation to promote the tools of a successful political system free from extremist tendencies (Feliu & Serra, 2015, pp. 20–23).

The 1970s were the ones that laid the foundations for more robust mechanisms regarding the protection of human rights, where the EP directly elected by the citizens had the obligation to give it consistency. It followed steps to elaborate on its own EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which was adopted in 2000. With the end of the Cold War, the EP turned its attention to other European

states to reappropriate them from Western political systems. Article F.2 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), one which came into force on 1 November 1993, emphasised that the activities of the Union should be made „with respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law. Article F(1) of the 1993 Treaty of Amsterdam reaffirms the commitment to protecting human rights. Article 3 mentions the relations with the wider world considering the founding principles of the EU’s activities” (Feliu & Serra, 2015, pp. 20–23).

The treaties have equipped EP with several political control instruments, as established by (Article 14(1) Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)) having the possibility to impose a “motion of censure of the Commission (Article 234 TFEU), the power of inquiry (Article 226 TFEU), oral and written questions (article 230 TFEU), budgetary control (Article 319 TFEU) and, indirectly, through the possibility to lodge complaints with the Court of Justice of the EU” (Poptcheva, 2019, p. 29).

All these mechanisms ended up being used successfully by the Parliament, which maintained its active role as a civilian power tool and demonstrated as a political entity, that regardless of the majority composition of the political groups, the trend of protecting human rights worldwide will remain its mission.

EP’s Instruments for Human Rights

Ever since its establishment in 1952 and its first assembly in 1958, the European Parliament wanted to be an expression of representative democracy specific to Western States. Its role is to protect the popular will on the policies of the European community, having a

major involvement of the citizens' voice in the decision-making process that inevitably affects them. This position has always claimed an active presence of the Parliament to ensure that the Member States respect fundamental human rights and that their policies will not restrict; on the contrary, they will develop their connection with the citizens. At the level of the European Communities and later in the structure of the European Union, the European Parliament has permanently strengthened its position, projecting its capacity to be the leading promoter of the individual. With all the results obtained within the community block and later the expansion within the European Union, the Parliament did not remain indifferent to human rights policies outside these structures, assuming an active and progressive role to strengthen and defend the human rights of the people and their activists worldwide.

Thus, if we are to consider a timeline, from its consultative role until 1970, the Parliament was granted budget supervision rights in time, and later, after the Maastricht Treaty, it was included in the co-decision procedure. Over time, a parliamentary network of relations between political groups at the member states' level was created, and the Parliament had an important role, including its positions in the Helsinki Agreements. If the Western States emphasized the importance of civil and political liberties, the communist states tried to emphasize the need for some social and economic rights. However, the European Parliament established itself as an advocate of human rights, defining the political agenda of the Western States. For example, in the Bilkerbach Report from 1961, the Parliament emphasized the importance of democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms as the core values of the European Communities (European Parliament, 1961).

Not only did the Member States include these criteria in the Declaration of European Identity (European Communities, 1973), but the representatives of the EP requested to be involved in the work of the Helsinki Conferences, insisting on its role to protect human rights. Also, the first free elections for the European Parliament in 1979 strengthened the European Parliament's argument of assumption and responsibility in developing the human rights and fundamental liberties agenda. The activity of the European Parliament proved tireless in the international promotion of human rights through MEP's political statements, emphasizing the need to bring Eastern European states to European values (De Angelis, 2011), resolutions against the USSR regarding the human rights situation in the communist satellite states (European Parliament, 1980a), boycott of international representation, such as participation in the Olympic Games in Moscow, due to the invasion of Afghanistan (European Parliament, 1980b) or granting political merits and recognitions to human rights activists (establishment of the Sakharov Prize in 1985) (European Parliament, 1985).

These numerous resolutions of the Parliament, together with other initiatives of dialogue and political interaction, led to the development of complex mechanisms of the European Parliament through which it positioned itself at the centre of debates on human rights. I will present these few mechanisms below, specifying that they do not have in mind the evaluation of all the political positions of the European Parliament through statements and resolutions made over time, as they are the subject of an entire monography, but with the attempt to capture the main levers that the Parliament uses in its capacity as promoter and defender of human rights worldwide.

Political Platforms

The European Parliament has developed political instruments to evaluate the status of human rights, along with concerns regarding democracy and the rule of law. Suppose that, at the EU level, the verification tools of the relevant institutions, such as the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, are clear and consistent. In that case, several EP subcommittees are focusing on constantly evaluating criteria on how these topics are respected in third countries, having the missions to elaborate reports and propose any policies that the Commission should consider in its partnerships. Thus, numerous committees have analysed to what extent EU policies are consistent with respect for human rights, minorities, and international law. The Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET), the Committee on International Trade (INTA), the Committee on Development (DEVE) and the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) ensure that human rights are equally an essential element of the work of Parliament's standing delegations, which interact with non-EU parliaments bilaterally or in the context of parliamentary assemblies (Kaskina, 2024).

The role of the Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) is all the more important as it is the one that has the main responsibility for evaluating and re-evaluating specific measures adopted by the European institutions, and which creates a coherence between all the EU's external policies and its human rights protection instruments (Kaskina, 2024). Through these evaluations, DROI ensures that the human rights protection mechanisms align with the principles and values of EU policies, and it also has the possibility to hold the Commission and the Council accountable for the measures

adopted in this sector. DROI creates the necessary dialogue between the central Union bodies working in the field of human rights protection in order to create consistency in the joint action of the EU at the international level, taking into account both the EU agenda and the principles of international law. In this sense, DROI represents the debate platform for various regional and international situations, which are later inserted in the reports of the Committee for Foreign Affairs and also of the Plenary of the Parliament for a broad debate on how measures are adopted towards third countries (EU Monitor, 2024).

These reports can be made by DROI and on its own initiative, launching debates on different topics of human rights protection and being able to submit these topics to debate in any other EU committees or bodies. Being endowed with the ability to organize delegations in third countries for the evaluation of human rights policies, DROI also has attributions regarding the organization of meetings with specific delegations for any matter and concern related to its field of activity (EU Monitor, 2024).

Day-to-day human rights dossiers are the DROI's concern and are realized through external monitoring and regular meetings. These meetings occur not only with states where human rights are flagrantly violated but the dialogue can also be held about states where these rights are traditionally respected. The framework of periodic meetings with the EEAS member states represents an opportunity to get actively involved in the positive monitoring or the exchange of good practices, constantly monitoring the resolutions adopted by the plenary of the European Parliament (Kaskina, 2024). Being at the forefront of EU action regarding the international protection of human rights, DROI also has an obligation to

maintain a constant dialogue with civil society, being the one that initiates or offers the possibility of debates of interest for different target groups. In this sense, DROI stands out as an EU body that aims to evaluate the files and prepare the procedure for awarding the Sakharov Prize, which I will discuss below (EU Monitor, 2024). DROI represents the responsibility with which the European Parliament assumes an essential role in promoting human rights at the international level, organizing a body meant to monitor these dynamics permanently, and once again underlining the constant concern for promoting European values.

Building Democracy and Human Rights Dialogue

Another important role the European Parliament assumes is to ensure that the political rights of citizens of third countries are respected. Thus, the mechanism developed by the European Parliament, Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG), has the mission of sending an observatory group to monitor the way in which elections in some third countries are carried out and are in accordance with respect for human rights. In this sense, the European Parliament created a working group made up of MEPs to coordinate the activity carried out by the delegates sent to different countries. It is made up of 15 members and advises the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative or Foreign Affairs through a Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, as adopted by the EP in 2007 (EP-DEG, 2023).

The European Parliament sends delegates only to those states where they are invited by the national authorities, especially in connection with the elections of heads of state and parliamentary

elections. Exceptionally, an observation mission can be assigned to local elections or national referendums. Through this participation, the European Parliament wants to ensure minimum democratic standards in the electoral process so that the rights of the citizens of the host states are respected. First, they have the right to vote, which is to be carried out within a universal suffrage. The right to freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and movements, and freedom of the press should not be restricted. This participation occurs in the context of meetings with political candidates, civil society, and other international observers (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023), monitoring how the elections are held and organizing press conferences (European Parliament, 2019a).

Thus, in the last parliamentary elections in Serbia in 2023, it was noted that some people were legally deprived of the right to vote, a suspicious ban, compared to some standards of the Venice Commission (European Parliament, 2023, December) or in Moldova, these measures were taken against people with disabilities, for which recommendations were made to evaluate the criteria by which some people are denied the right to vote. In the case of other states, the election procedures for voter registration were evaluated, and the possibility of extra-nationally challenging some judicial measures was evaluated (European Parliament, 2023, November).

Since 1984, over 75 observation missions have been carried out in over 200 electoral processes. The main effects pursued by the European Parliament are mainly related to promotion and awareness, which will subsequently lead to the advancement of political rights and the confidence of citizen involvement in electoral processes. With an observation from the European Parliament,

international attention is drawn to how the country in question understands to respect the rights of its own citizens. Moreover, some states are inclined to invite the European Parliament to evaluate the elections precisely in order to be able to create a dialogue and even an economic cooperation framework with the European Union, ensuring, in this sense, a favourable position from the European Parliament in order to conclude some agreements (European Parliament, 2019b).

These actions of the European Parliament also aim at parliamentary capacity building so that the citizens of third countries are represented democratically, and their rights are debated and inserted into the legislative procedures. For this reason, the European Parliament provides platforms for mediation and dialogue between the authorities and representatives of civil society. It helps that after the election, parliaments assume a healthy and adequate role in the purpose for which they were elected. Although these mechanisms mostly have an awareness role, they create the conditions for advancing, even with small steps, the respect of human rights by raising awareness of the political capacity assumed by citizens and internalizing the importance of their fundamental rights (European Parliament, 2019b).

In this sense, Jean Monnet Dialogues for Peace and Democracy represents another step by which the European Parliament strengthens its international role in promoting human rights. They were launched in 2016 with the aim of creating dialogue and mediation platforms so as to build the consensus necessary for generating a democratic parliamentary culture and trust. Being named after the great architect of the European Union, Jean Monnet, they are usually held in the Jean Monnet House in Bazoches-sur-Guyonne,

France, with different concerned actors, in order to implement the inter-parties dialogue to obtain the best results in the adoption of policies consensual, intended to ensure representativeness and inclusion. For example, the dialogues that started with Ukraine in 2015 focused on anti-corruption policies and institutional reform. Also, the dialogues with the Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia focused on the parliamentary culture of dialogue (EP-GDS, 2024). The purpose of these dialogues is to create the necessary contexts for projects of political representatives to be included in legislative packages so that there is a correspondence between the political act and the rights and freedoms of citizens, which different political parties promote.

Awarding Humanity

For an appreciation of the individual effort to promote human rights, the European Parliament assumed a ceremonial role of recognising those who share the values assiduously supported by the European legislature. Since 1988, the European Parliament annually awards the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought (European Parliament, 2024a). This award is part of a complex system of initiatives through which the European Parliament tries to create awareness about the role that human rights should have in each country; the award creates a position of international recognition of the way in which the European Parliament monitors and gets involved in the promotion of human rights. In this sense, several aspects must be mentioned that underline the political and civic effects that the award creates.

The “Freedom of Thought” award has a major implication, recognising the right to freedom of expression as a foundation for

respecting and protecting other types of rights. The European Parliament emphasises that the award “reflects its conviction that fundamental freedoms include not only the right to life and physical integrity but also freedom of expression and the press, two of the most effective means of fighting oppression and key yardsticks by which to judge whether a society is democratic and open” (European Parliament, 2006). The prize is named after Soviet nuclear physicist Andrei Sakharov (1921–1989). He was laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975, being among the founders of the Moscow Helsinki Group and one of the best-known Soviet dissidents. His civic activity and his critical position against the use of nuclear weapons were realised in close connection with civic activism for the promotion of human rights in the USSR.

It is no coincidence that the name of the award is that of a European citizen but not a citizen of any Member State of the European Union, underlining the desire of the Parliament to promote human rights outside the Union and to issue an invitation to those who fight for human rights outside EU borders, to get involved in an activism meant to be recognised and appreciated by the European Parliament and the international community, precisely in order to be considered a model of civic and political conduct of the citizens in the international community.

Keeping with this idea, over its 25-year history, the Sakharov Prize has been awarded to 35 individuals and organisations (many co-laureates) from 27 different countries. Among them, five prizes were awarded in Asia, MENA and Eastern Europe, four in Africa and Latin America, three prizes in the Balkans area and only two for the EU (France and Spain) and 1 for international organisations (UN) (European Parliament, 2013, p. 21). Thus, the award is

given to individuals and organisations, many of whom are non-citizens or non-residents of the EU, for their courage in promoting human rights values; the European Parliament emphasises that it remains vigilant and grateful for these efforts, the award becoming over time a reference and a looked-for recognition in the international community. Nevertheless, what are the effects of this award on the international human rights agenda?

First of all, many of the benefits for the prize winners can be obvious: visibility and recognition, access to the international community, moral support, personal security, and perhaps among the most important, empowerment and support of activities. All this is intended to ensure and grant visibility and support for their human rights activism, creating a state of awareness and recognition of human values (European Parliament, 2013, pp. 13–14).

Although it is difficult to establish an apparent political effect of the prize on civic activity, some important nuances were observed once the prize was awarded. First of all, the reaction of the laureates' state of origin was mostly hostile, by ignoring the whole event or, on the contrary, launching accusations that the prize is awarded only on grounds of political hostility between the EU and the government of the state of origin (case of PRC 2008). In other situations, governments resorted to disinformation campaigns, creating a distorted image of the laureate in the country of origin or in the international community (cases of Cuba and Belarus). Such positions have only created platforms for debates regarding the situation of human rights in the laureates' country of origin. Also, regarding the debates, the award generated new discussions or energised the pre-existing debates on specific topics (case of Basque). This led to civil society reactions and mobilisation

for effervescent and complex activism (European Parliament, 2013, pp. 15–17).

However, some criticisms of the award highlight the lack of concrete effect on civil society and, even more, the tightening of the actions of the state of origin through political and legal instruments that further hinder the freedom of thought in the respective country (e.g. the case of Russian Federation or the Egyptian laureate Asmaa Mahfouz-who was placed under investigation by the Supreme State Security Prosecutor on charges of espionage for receiving 'foreign money'). From this point of view, a reflection should be made on three dimensions of reaction to awarding the Sakharov prize: a country's geopolitical position (Russian Federation and People's Republic of China) determines the introduction and integration of these subjects in the dialogue report and bilateral relations. The degree and nature of linkage to the European Union claim a firmer position in the negotiations for a common interest (the case of Kosovo). Also, the domestic political opportunity structure offers the possibility of cooperation with states open to change and experiencing a certain degree of opening and political reform (such as in the case of Cuba, where the prize was awarded three times). Some future developments remain to be considered: aspects related to improving the impact on laureates' personal circumstances, improving the impact on the diplomatic/government level, improving the impact on public debate, improving the impact on civil society or definitely tapping into the potential of the Sakharov Community Network (European Parliament, 2013, pp. 18–20).

This network is composed of award winners, creating the possibility of an intense dialogue to promote human rights worldwide. As appointed Ambassadors for Freedom of Thought, they

have the role of creating awareness regarding respecting human rights and including constant dialogue between politicians and citizens (European Parliament, 2018).

The Constraining Role of the EP

From all of the above, it emerges the active role that the European Parliament has understood to assume the promotion of human rights in third countries. Although they are mainly outlined around some recommendations and political interactions intended to lead to an awareness process, this aspect leaves the impression of a European Parliament that promotes fundamental rights only at the declarative level, without having the real possibility to sanction and compel the actors to assume effectively the content of human rights. However, the European Parliament is not without tools to ensure that its statements are not taken into account, creating over decades the legal framework necessary for its position on the violation of human rights outside the EU to be not only understood but even assumed as a priority.

In the European institutional architecture, the role of the Parliament is legitimized through the elections by the European citizens. Over time, it was necessary to increase its contribution to the legislative process significantly. Even if, at first sight, the discussion about the determined and influential role of the Parliament in relation to the Commission and the Council can be doubted, the way in which the Parliament understood to capitalize the provisions of the treaties that give it certain prerogatives, suggests the assumption of increasing involvement of Parliament in international negotiations. In this sense, many of the international

agreements receive an opinion from the Parliament, which is focused that certain elements of major importance, such as conditions related to the respect of human rights, are assumed in the policies and agenda of the Commission and of third country states in their negotiations.

Firstly, annual reports on human rights represent a way in which the European Parliament summarizes the situation of human rights globally. Through the mechanism of Annual Reports, the Parliament creates not only an update of the main issues related to fundamental rights but also evaluates the results of the implementation of the various instruments and policies approved and assigned to the Commission to be carried out. For example, in the annual report for 2022 (European Parliament, 2022a), The Parliament is concerned about the way in which fundamental rights are violated, carrying out an analysis that will create awareness, but also objectives that the European Union must follow in the coming years on the political agenda. Below, I will analyse the other main instruments the European Parliament has at its disposal for promoting and respecting human rights worldwide.

The Power of EP's Non-Binding Resolutions

The main mechanism used is urgent resolutions. However, their non-binding character leaves the impression of a weak European Parliament, a simple procedure in the overall decision-making process between the Commission and the Council. As we will see below, resolutions do not remain without political effects and, even more, legal consequences, but they greatly influence the economy of the European decision-making process.

The importance of the non-binding Resolution is decisive precisely because it provides the transparency of a plenary debate, where it is also voted on, and which emphasizes the position of the Parliament as a representative of the European citizens regarding a particular subject, determining that this position is taken into account and consideration by the Commission and the Council in concluding some international treaties, precisely to give them a democratic legitimacy (Hart, 2020, p. 329). Through resolutions, Parliament has the opportunity to make the decision-making process transparent, inviting additional debates, such as the civil society, for a substantial contribution to the legislative package or the concluded international agreement. Likewise, using resolutions to establish the framework that Parliament wants to achieve creates conditions of negotiation that the Commission must consider, establishing a direct and continuous link with the relevant commissioners and generating a legitimate consensual authority.

Article 295 TFEU allows EP members to access the specific documentation of an international agreement precisely to ensure the possibility of observations intended to influence the final content of the act (European Parliament, 2015, December 2). For example, in the EU-Japan agreement, the Parliament asked the Council to postpone the debates until new observations regarding the agreement's content can be made. This position of the Parliament to request a delay in the signing of international agreements, such as the one with India (European Parliament, 2011a) or Vietnam (European Parliament, 2014a), only after the prior evaluation of the Parliament, was found in numerous situations, the Parliament becoming very firm in its role as evaluator of the content of the treaties (European Parliament, 2012a).

Moreover, the Treaty of European Union (TEU) establishes through Article 36 that for any policy on the common foreign and security policy, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, as the vice-president of the European Commission, should inform the European Parliament on the evolution of their agenda, in order for the EP to question it and recommend, if case, new directions. European Parliament's resolutions have the mission "to raise awareness of human rights abuses, support human rights defenders, shape the EU's human rights policy through concrete policy proposals, and highlight flagrant violations of human rights across the world" (Kaskina, 2024).

Financing Human Rights

In order to maintain coherence regarding the assumption of the role of the European Union as a promoter of human rights in the world, a budget is allocated annually for projects that create platforms for awareness, promotion and consolidation of fundamental rights. In this sense, the European Parliament also has a dominant position conferred particularly by Article 14 of the TEU (European Union, 2016a) and Article 310(1) of the TFEU (European Union, 2008), through which the Parliament has the opportunity to be in projects such as Global Europe and other financing instruments used for the promotion of human rights. In addition, Parliament is a co-legislator for the external financing instruments that benefit the target groups, keeping an active role in determining EU policies regarding fundamental rights.

At the ingenuity of the Parliament, the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR I) was created in 1994

to promote the rule of law and human rights worldwide, together with the recognition of civil society as a key actor in the process. This instrument was re-adapted in 2006, becoming the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR II), having similar approaches to protecting civil society and human rights. Through specific instruments of the European Neighbourhood Policy, EIDHR II managed to finance over 1000 million euros in human rights projects in the financial plan 2007–2013. Between 2013 and 2020, it was over 1.4 billion euros, the programs being extended especially on human rights and some on good governance, capacity-building for parliamentarians, institution building, or democratic/civic education (Babayan & Viviani, 2013).

Having a legal foundation such as Regulation (EU) No 235/2014 (European Parliament, & Council of the European Union, 2014a) and Regulation (EU) No 236/2014 (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2014b), the Parliament has contributed to numerous projects for the promotion and consolidation of human rights, through the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (2000–2006) having as main objectives: support to Human Rights and Human Rights Defenders (HRD), support to other priorities of the EU in the field of Human Rights, support to Democracy, EU election observation missions, support to targeted key actors and processes; having various implementation programs such as Supporting 101 Calls for Proposals, targeting local civil society through country-based support schemes (CBSS) or supporting human rights priorities. Among the beneficiaries of the programs were states from the Mediterranean area (Bicchi, 2009), but also Afghanistan (SAHRA), Media freedom support in Russia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan, and Green Voices Cambodia: Enhancing

free speech for Cambodia's environmental HRD. To these were added other types of projects and programs in the form of the External Financial Instruments Package through which the instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, the Partnership Instrument (PI), the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI), the instrument for Pre-accession Assistance II (IPA II), the Instrument for Development Cooperation (DCI), all totalling over 6% of the annual EU budget (Dobreva, 2015).

In the Global Europe agenda for the period 2021–2027, the Parliament assumed the role of approving the financing of over 79 billion euros for development, neighbourhood and international cooperation over the next seven years. These projects will have as their target the development of democracy and human rights in the neighbouring states, but also other states in the global regions, and which will have in mind the high-level dialogue of Human Rights, civil society and global challenges (European Parliament, 2021a).

EU Accession On a Human Rights Foundation

One of the leading cases in which the European Parliament has a decisive say is the case of states that wish to accede as members of the Union, based on the Copenhagen criteria, as adopted by the European Council. The negotiations carried out by the European Commission, as well as the evaluations of other Union bodies, are carefully supervised by the Parliament. Its resolutions are able to change the course of negotiations, to suspend them or, on the contrary, to accelerate them, creating the mechanisms of a position of strength of the Parliament, which, on the other hand, cannot be overlooked. In this sense, numerous negotiation files for accession

to the European Union have in mind an unshakable foundation for the respect of human rights, the candidate states being asked to adopt legislation and measures implemented through institutions to ensure that fundamental rights are respected. The evaluation process towards which the European Parliament proved vigilant, sanctioning any deviation from the principles that govern the functioning of the European Union.

Thus, as an example, it can be noted that in the case of Montenegro, the evolutionary nature of the European Parliament's discourse regarding the measures adopted by the state authorities can be observed, compared to what the 2014 report notes, among other things, that anti-discrimination policies must be eliminated, or strengthening the role of the Ombudsman, but also the timid role of the Constitutional Court to solve the cases that foresee the systematic violations of Human Rights (European Parliament, 2014). Recent reports insist on respect for freedom of expression and condemn policies regarding national minorities but nevertheless praise Montenegro's visible and advanced efforts to implement the *acquis*, encouraging the continuation of negotiations for future accession (European Parliament, 2021).

An important case is that of the Republic of Türkiye, whose candidacy process started in 1999, and which was, on numerous occasions, subjected to rigorous evaluations, especially regarding the dimension of human rights. Türkiye's candidacy file is one of the most representative in the way the European Parliament understood to assume the role of rigorous evaluator of human rights policies. Thus, in 2016, the European Parliament agreed to suspend the accession negotiations with Türkiye temporarily, strongly condemned the failed military coup, and recalled that "the Turkish

Government's repressive measures under the state of emergency are disproportionate and in breach of basic rights and freedoms protected by the Turkish Constitution, of democratic values upon which the European Union. Thus, according to paragraph 5 of the Negotiating Framework stipulates that, in the case of a serious and persistent breach in Turkey of the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law on which the Union is founded, the Commission will, on its own initiative or the request of one-third of the Member States, recommend the suspension of negotiations and propose the conditions for eventual resumption" (European Parliament, 2016).

The European Parliament can request the European Commission to start the negotiation procedure with other states, being the one that confers the position of *candidate states*. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the European Parliament retained the steps taken in the protection of human rights, emphasizes the importance of continuing these mechanisms, and understands to offer the position of a candidate state, considering that the steps for the protection of human rights can be carried out under the careful supervision of the Parliament in the process of accession (European Parliament, 2023). This approach was also carried in relation to Georgia and Ukraine, offering them also the status of candidate countries, requesting the Commission to start negotiations, to which the European Parliament underlines that "accession to the EU must take place in accordance with Article 49 TEU, based on respect for the relevant procedures and conditional upon the fulfilment of the established criteria, in particular the so-called Copenhagen criteria for EU membership, and remains a merit-based process that requires adoption and implementation of relevant reforms,

notably in the areas of democracy, the rule of law, human rights, a market economy and implementation of the EU *acquis*" (European Parliament, 2022).

It is not unusual for the European Parliament to have such firm positions regarding a state's accession process. The above examples note the role of the European Parliament in encouraging or suspending, as the case may be, the accession process and granting the status of a candidate country. Parliament will continue to play an active role in evaluating human rights policies as a fundamental landmark.

Conditioning International Agreements

The Lisbon Treaty has also offered enhanced powers to the European Parliament regarding the conclusion of international agreements. Although it is not directly involved in these international negotiations and agreements, the European Parliament has the possibility to influence the process, being able also, as in the case of the EU accession of some states, to block or suspend the procedures. Thus, the decision-making procedures of the European Parliament (108–109) (European Parliament, 2015), but also articles 207 and 208 TFEU to which are added other procedures such as points 23, 24 and 25 of the Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission (European Parliament & European Commission, 2010), gives the European Parliament the right to be informed during the procedures, having the possibility to monitor the entire process and at the end, to approve or refuse the adoption of the entire agreement.

As an example, I mention that numerous international agreements have been evaluated by the European Parliament, which

can have an objection position regarding the conclusion of an agreement precisely because of concerns regarding the violation of human rights. Thus, in May 2010, the European Parliament, in its resolution, decided to “postpone its consent for renewal of the Passengers Name Record agreements (PNR) with the USA and Australia. Later, in November 2010, the EP requested that PNR agreements with the US, Australia and Canada should be renegotiated since existing ones do not provide an adequate level of protection for the passenger’s personal data. Moreover, the European Parliament rejected the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) in July 2012. ACTA is an international agreement (on the protection of intellectual property rights) between the EU, its Member States and ten other countries. The EP rejected the agreement mainly due to concerns about the endangerment of civil liberties if the agreement was enforced” (Anosovs, 2013; Vutz, 2012; Stull, 2011).

TFEU, through articles 207 and 218, gives the European Parliament the possibility to approve international commercial agreements. In this sense, the European Parliament can analyse the conditions for implementing a future commercial agreement and even impose preliminary reports on the human rights situation before it is signed. Regarding the trade agreement with Colombia, the European Parliament proved very firm during the negotiations, insisting that there be clear clauses regarding the respect of human rights, putting pressure that in the future, there should be a clear line in the development of policies to respect fundamental rights (European Parliament, 2007; Brando et al., 2015, pp. 140–142).

Moreover, on another occasion, the European Parliament chose to block the effects of some commercial collaboration protocols

against the background of suspicions of human rights violations by third partner states. In 2011, the European Parliament accepted the unanimous position of the Foreign Affairs Committee to block the export of textiles based on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) concluded with Uzbekistan in 1999 (European Communities, 1999), on the background of suspicions of the MEPs' (Bearder & Donskis, 2011, May 12; Jozwiak, 2011, October 4) of forced child labour in the cotton harvest industry (European Parliament, 2011).

Moreover, in certain cases, the European Parliament, through its own committees, understands to draw the attention of the Commission or other Union bodies in order to take the necessary measures so that relations with third countries are carried out with great care, considering the human rights situation. For example, regarding Mauritania, Parliament recommended that the Commission be careful in taking dialogue measures as long as serious human rights concerns exist. Also, in this sense, FRONTEX was invited to strengthen its role in the protection of its own employees but also not to participate in joint actions with Mauritania, considering the negative report on human rights made by the Parliament (European Parliament, 2023).

The Parliament's role is visible in that it resorts to sanctioning and coercive measures by which it understands to promote the respect of human rights, remaining a reference in evaluating the way in which they are respected by states that want to create partnerships with the European Union. The Parliament undertakes to maintain its consolidated role as the main pillar in the defence of fundamental rights in its capacity as a democratically elected representative body.

Addressing Next Generations

As a representative body of European citizens, the European Parliament has not neglected its democratic role, being very active and decisive in the way the political system existing in the EU ends up being promoted and consolidated outside the EU. The political mechanisms, the financial instruments, and the legal positions considered by the Parliament confirm its assumed role and the tireless work to align itself with the policies that determined its establishment.

In this sense, the Parliament's programs are also addressed to the next generations, creating the necessary framework for young people to be included in the political and civic awareness and education agenda launched by the European legislature. The projects in which young people from different third countries are involved are meant to design for the future the way in which the development of human rights is assured. The Parliament has built country-specific programs to facilitate a constructive dialogue with individuals or various organizations from third countries, being found within the EP Comprehensive Democracy Support Approach (CDSA), or ad hoc initiatives such as Sudan. There are also country-to-country programs designed to support and develop an open dialogue, such as those between Israel and Palestine or between the two states of Sudan. Regional programs are focused on youth from the neighbourhood of the EU, creating partnerships in Eastern Europe, the Maghreb or the Balkans (European Parliament, 2024A).

The Young Political Leaders Program has an assumed goal to create long-term relations with countries outside of the EU by initiating joint programs with young people who stand out in

order to strengthen policies within the country of origin. The Annual Fora for Young Leaders from the European Neighbourhood (Maghreb, Middle East, Eastern Partnership) and the Young Political Leaders initiative for the Sudan represent instruments endorsed by the European Parliament's Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG) in April 2015, having as objectives "to target young political activists, including political party representatives, civil society actors and young business leaders in the European Neighbourhood countries, priority countries agreed under the European Parliament's Comprehensive Democracy Support Approach (CDSA), and ad hoc countries requiring assistance in the area of parliamentary conflict prevention and democracy support" (European Parliament, 2024b).

Starting in 2016, meetings were held among young political activists, whose mission is not only to create awareness about their rights but also the ability for them to play an active role in promoting fundamental rights, both in the capacity they have it now but also in the perspective that they will represent political leaders in the future, with key positions in their democracies. In this way, the European Parliament ensures that new generations are created for the future, meant to consolidate what has been created so far, where the dialogue on the human rights agenda will remain a key dimension in political debates, not only in the EU but also in third countries.

References

- Anosovs, E. (2013, October 22). Parliament's enhanced role in international agreements. Epthinktank. <https://epthinktank.eu/2013/10/22/parliaments-enhanced-role-in-international-agreements/>, accessed at 01.04.2024.

- Babayan, N., & Viviani, A. (2013). *"Shocking" adjustments? EU human rights and democracy promotion*. Transworld Working Paper No. 18. Istituto Affari Internazionali. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/TW_WP_18.pdf, accessed at 10.04.2024.
- Bearder, C., & Donskis, L. (2011, May 12). *Parliamentary question – E-005014/2011: Child labour in Uzbekistan's cotton industry*. European Parliament. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-7-2011-005014_EN.html?redirect, accessed at 02.02, 2024
- Bicchi, F. (2009). Democracy assistance in the Mediterranean: An overview. *Mediterranean Politics*, 14(1), 61–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629390902747459>, accessed at 01.04.2024.
- Brando, N., Hachez, N., Lein, B., & Marx, A. (2015). *The impact of EU trade and development policies on human rights*. FRAME Deliverable 9.2. Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies. Available at: <https://fp7-frame.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Deliverable-9.2.pdf>
- De Angelis, E. (2011). The European Parliament's Identity Discourse and Eastern Europe, 1974–2004. *Journal of the European Integration History*. 17(1), pp. 103–116.
- Dobрева, A. (2015). *European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights*. European Parliamentary Research Service. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/568332/EPRS_BRI\(2015\)568332_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/568332/EPRS_BRI(2015)568332_EN.pdf), accessed at 01.04.2024.
- EP-DEG. (2023). *European Parliament, Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/globaldemocracy/support/en/home/democracy-group>, accessed at 13.03.2024
- EP-GDS. (2024). *European Parliament, Global Democracy Support, Jean Monnet Dialogues, Carrying on a legacy of peacemaking*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/globaldemocracysupport/en/mediation-and-dialogue/jean-monnet-dialogues>, accessed at 01.04.2024.
- EU Monitor. (2024). *European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights, Brussels*. Available at: <https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vl5ycw858uvr?ctx=vg9hjllgxmz&tab=2&n=37>, accessed at 13.03.2024.
- European Communities. (1973). *Declaration on European Identity*. Bulletin of the European Communities. December 1973, No 12. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, p. 118–122. Available at: https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/1999/1/1/02798dc9-9c69-4b7d-b2c9-f03a8db7da32/publishable_en.pdf, accessed at 02.02.2024

- European Communities. (1999). Partnership and Cooperation Agreement establishing a partnership between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Uzbekistan, of the other part. *Official Journal of the European Communities*, L 229/3, 31 August 1999. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:3fc91869-1662-40ed-a106-b5015b71b1b6.0019.02/DOC_1&format=PDF, accessed at 02.02.2024
- European Parliament & Council of the European Union. (2014a). Regulation (EU) No 235/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014 establishing a financing instrument for democracy and human rights worldwide. *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 77, 85–94. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32014R0235>, accessed at 01.04.2024.
- European Parliament & Council of the European Union. (2014b). Regulation (EU) No 236/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014 laying down common rules and procedures for the implementation of the Union's instruments for financing external action. *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 77, 95–108. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32014R0236>, accessed at 01.04.2024.
- European Parliament & European Commission. (2010). *Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission*. *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 304/47. 20 November 2010. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2010:304:0047:0062:EN:PDF>
- European Parliament. (1961). Report by Willi Birkelbach on the political and institutional aspects of accession to or association with the Community (19 December 1961), in Luxembourg Center for Contemporary and Digital History, https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/report_by_willi_birkelbach_on_the_political_and_institutional_aspects_of_accession_to_or_as_sociation_with_the_community_19_december_1961-en-2d53201e-09db-43ee-9f80-552812d39c03.html, accessed at 02.02.2024.
- European Parliament. (1980a). Resolution on the respect for human rights in Czechoslovakia. *Official Journal of European Communities*. 12 April. no. CI 17, CARDOC, PEI AP RP/POLI.1979 A 1-08 15/79/0001, cited by Aurelie Elisa Gfeller, Champion of Human Rights: The European Parliament and the Helsinki Process, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (APRIL 2014), p. 399.

- European Parliament. (1980b). Resolution on the Moscow Olympic Games. *Official Journal of European Communities*, 10 March, no. C59, CARDOC, PEI AP PR B 1-0779 79 000. cited by Aurelie Elisa Gfeller, Champion of Human Rights: The European Parliament and the Helsinki Process, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (APRIL 2014), p. 399.
- European Parliament. (1985). Resolution on the creation of a Sakharov prize. *Official Journal of European Communities*, 31 December, no. C352, CARDOC, PE2 AP RP/POLI.1984 A2-0 137/85/001. cited by Aurelie Elisa Gfeller, Champion of Human Rights: The European Parliament and the Helsinki Process, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (APRIL 2014), p. 395.
- European Parliament. (2006). *Sakharov Prize of Freedom of Thought*. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/multimedia/eplive/cont/20061211MLT01299/media_20061211MLT01299.pdf, accessed at 02.02.2024
- European Parliament. (2007). European Parliament recommendation of 15 March 2007 to the Council on the negotiating mandate for an association agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and the Andean Community and its member countries, of the other part (2006/2221(INI)). Official Journal of the European Union, C 301 E, 238–243. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52007IP0080&qid=1527927070182&from=EN>, accessed at 02.02.2024. f
- European Parliament. (2011a). *Resolution of 11 May 2011 on the state of play in the EU-India Free Trade Agreement negotiations* (2012/C 377 E/03). Official Journal of the European Union. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52011IP0224>
- European Parliament. (2011b). Interim report on the draft Council decision on the conclusion of a Protocol to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement establishing a partnership between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Uzbekistan, of the other part, amending the Agreement in order to extend the provisions of the Agreement to bilateral trade in textiles, taking account of the expiry of the bilateral textiles Agreement (A7-0427/2011). European Union. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-7-2011-0427_EN.pdf, accessed at 02.02.2024
- European Parliament. (2012). *Resolution of 13 June 2012 on EU trade negotiations with Japan* (2012/2651(RSP)). Official Journal of the European Union,

(2013/C 332 E/06). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52012IP0246>

European Parliament. (2013). *The European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, 1988–2013: A quarter century's engagement in human rights*. Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, Policy Department. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/209823/EXPO-JOIN_ET\(2013\)433758_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/209823/EXPO-JOIN_ET(2013)433758_EN.pdf), accessed at 02.02.2024

European Parliament. (2014a). *Resolution of 17 April 2014 on the state of play of the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement negotiations* (2013/2989(RSP)). Official Journal of the European Union, (2017/C 443/13). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52014IP0458>.

European Parliament. (2014b). *European Parliament resolution of 6 February 2014 on the 2013 progress report on Montenegro* (2013/2882(RSP)). Official Journal of the European Union. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2014-0104_EN.html, accessed at 01.04.2024.

European Parliament. (2015a). *Rules of procedure of the European Parliament: Title III, Chapter 1, Rules 108–109*. 8th parliamentary term. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RULES-8-2015-04-28-TOC_EN.html?redirect#GAX7, accessed at 01.04.2024

European Parliament. (2015b). *All MEPs to have access to all confidential TTIP documents*. December 2. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20151202IPR05759/all-meps-to-have-access-to-all-confidential-ttip-documents> accessed at 06.02.2024

European Parliament. (2016a). *European Parliament resolution of 13 April 2016 on the situation in Poland* (P8_TA(2016)0123). Official Journal of the European Union. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0123_EN.pdf, accessed at 08.02.2024.

European Parliament. (2016b). *European Parliament resolution of 24 November 2016 on EU-Turkey relations* (2016/2993(RSP)). Official Journal of the European Union. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0450_EN.pdf, accessed at 01.04.2024

European Parliament. (2018). *The Sakharov Prize – Sakharov Prize Community*, Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sakharovprize/en/the-prize/sakharov-prize-community>, accessed at 13.03.2024.

European Parliament. (2019a). *Election observation by the European Parliament*. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/212760/Election-observation_EN.pdf, accessed at 21.03.2024

- European Parliament. (2019b). *Global Democracy Support – May 2019*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/212219/GDS-Brochure-EN-REV-web.pdf>, accessed at 23.03.2024
- European Parliament. (2021a). *Global Europe – Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/ro/global-europe-neighbourhood-development-/product-details/20210331CDT04983>, accessed at 01.04.2024.
- European Parliament. (2021b). *European Parliament resolution of 19 May 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on Montenegro (2019/2173(INI))*. Official Journal of the European Union. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/seance_pleniere/textes_adoptes/definitif/2021/05-19/0244/P9_TA\(2021\)0244_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/seance_pleniere/textes_adoptes/definitif/2021/05-19/0244/P9_TA(2021)0244_EN.pdf), accessed at 01.04.2024.
- European Parliament. (2022a). Report A9-0298/2022 on human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter – Annual Report 2022. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0298_EN.html, accessed on 01.04.2024.
- European Parliament. (2022b). *European Parliament resolution of 23 June 2022 on the candidate status of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia (2022/2716(RSP))*. Official Journal of the European Union. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/255856/TA-9-2022-0249_EN.pdf, accessed at 01.04.2024.
- European Parliament. (2023a). Republic of Serbia – Early Parliamentary Elections, 17 December 2023. Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions Preliminary Conclusions. International Election Observation Mission. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/279788/Serbia-Early-parliamentary-elections-Preliminary-findings-and-conclusions.pdf>, accessed at 01.04.2024
- European Parliament. (2023b). Republic of Moldova – Local Elections, 5 November 2023. Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions Preliminary Conclusions. International Election Observation Mission. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/279785/Moldova-Local-elections-Preliminary-findings-and-conclusions.pdf>, accessed at 01.04.2024
- European Parliament. (2023c). *European Parliament resolution of 5 October 2023 on taking stock of Moldova's path to the EU (2023/2838(RSP))*. Official Journal of the European Union. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/279524/TA-9-2023-0357_EN.pdf, accessed at 01.04.2024.

- European Parliament. (2023d). Report on a European Parliament recommendation concerning negotiations on a status agreement between the European Union and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania on operational activities carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (2023/2087(INI)). Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0358_EN.pdf, accessed at 01.04.2024.
- European Parliament. (2024a). *European Parliament resolution of 18 January 2024 on the situation in Hungary and frozen EU funds* (2024/2512(RSP)). Official Journal of the European Union. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0053_EN.pdf, accessed at 08.02.2024.
- European Parliament. (2024b). *The Sakharov Prize – What it is about*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sakharovprize/en/home/>, accessed at 08.02.2024.
- European Parliament. (2024c). *Ways the European Parliament engages with Young Political Leaders*. Young Political Leaders Programme. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/youngpoliticalleaders/en/ways-the-european-parliament-engages-wit/products-details/20211006CDT08585>, accessed at 01.04.2024.
- European Parliament. (2024d). *Strong and lasting relations with future leaders*. Young Political Leaders Programme. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/youngpoliticalleaders/en/strong-and-lasting-relations-with-future/products-details/20211006CDT08583>, accessed at 01.04.2024.
- European Union Election Observation Mission. (2023). *Final report: Zimbabwe harmonised elections*. 23 August. European Union. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/279784/Zimbabwe-General-elections-Final-report.pdf>, accessed at 01.04.2024.
- European Union. (2008). Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union – Part Six: Institutional and Financial Provisions – Title II: Financial Provisions – Article 310 (ex Article 268 TEC). Official Journal of the European Union, 115, 181. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12008E310>, accessed at 01.04.2024.
- European Union. (2016). *Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union: Article 14*. Official Journal of the European Union, C 202, 22-23. http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2016/art_14/oj, accessed at 01.04.2024

- Feliu, L. and Serra, F. (2015). The European Union as a 'normative power' and the normative voice of the European Parliament, in Stelios Stavridis and Daniela Irrera (Eds.). *The European Parliament and its International Relations*. Routledge, 2015.
- Hart, N. M. (2020). A "legal eccentricity": The European Parliament, its non-binding resolution, and the legitimacy of the EU's trade agreements. *University of Bologna Law Review*, 5(2), 329–360. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2531-6133/12291>
- Irrera, D. (2015). The European Parliament as an international actor, in Stelios Stavridis and Daniela Irrera (Eds.). *The European Parliament and its International Relations*. Routledge, 2015.
- Jozwiak, R. (2011, October 4). *EU lawmakers block textile deal with Uzbekistan over child labor concerns*. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/eu_lawmakers_block_textile_deal_with_uzbekistan_over_child_labor_concerns/24349083.html, accessed at 02.02.2024
- Kaskina, R. (2024). Human Rights. *Factsheets on the European Union*. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU_5.4.1.pdf, accessed at 12.03.2024
- Neunreither, K. (2000), 'Political Representation in the European Union: A Common Whole, Various Wholes, or Just a Hole?', in Karlheinz Neunreither, and Antje Wiener (eds), *European Integration After Amsterdam: Institutional Dynamics and Prospects for Democracy*. Oxford University Press.
- Poptcheva, E. M. (2019). Parliamentary Oversight: Challenges Facing Classic Scrutiny Instruments and the Emergence of New Forms of 'Steering' Scrutiny, in Costa, O. (Ed.). *The European Parliament in times of EU crisis Dynamics and Transformations*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stull, G. (2011). *Passenger Name Records Agreements: EU agreements with the US and other third countries*. Library of the European Parliament. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2011/110194/LDM_BRI\(2011\)110194_REV2_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2011/110194/LDM_BRI(2011)110194_REV2_EN.pdf), accessed at 01.04.2024
- Vutz, C. (2012). *ACTA – Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement*. Library of the European Parliament. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2012/120332/LDM_BRI\(2012\)120332_R EV1_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2012/120332/LDM_BRI(2012)120332_R EV1_EN.pdf), accessed at 01.04.2024

The Power of the European Parliament in Budgetary Negotiations: A Case Study of the MFF and NGEU

*Doru TODORESCU**

Introduction

Since the inception of European integration, the European Parliament (EP) has undergone significant changes regarding its role and powers. One of the most notable areas of evolution is its budgetary powers, which have transformed from a largely consultative function into a fundamental component of the EU's legislative and financial governance. This article examines the development of the EP's budgetary powers, focusing on key moments such as the Lisbon Treaty, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), and the introduction of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) instrument. By tracing the historical context and recent developments, we aim to highlight the growing influence of the EP in shaping and defining the EU budget, as well as the implications of this evolution for the Union's governance.

* Dr. Doru Todorescu is an Associate Lecturer at the Department of International Studies and Contemporary History of the Faculty of History and Philosophy (Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca).

Budgetary Powers of the EP before the Lisbon Treaty

The European Parliament's (EP) budgetary powers have undergone constant transformation since the institution's establishment, leading to broader changes in the governance structure of the European Union (EU). Initially, as the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952, the EP's role was largely consultative, with limited capacity to influence the budgetary process. The Treaty of Rome (1957), which founded the European Economic Community (EEC), granted the EP only minimal budgetary authority, allowing it to issue opinions on the budget proposed by the Council of Ministers but without the power to amend or reject it (Nugent, 2017; Hix & Høyland, 2011).

The first significant expansion of the EP's budgetary powers came with the budgetary treaties of 1970 and 1975, which introduced a distinction between compulsory and non-compulsory expenditures. Compulsory expenditures, which included the Common Agricultural Policy, remained under the control of the Council of Ministers, while the EP was granted the right to amend non-compulsory expenditures. This division marked an important stage in the gradual empowerment of the EP, as it provided a formal mechanism for the EP to impact resource allocation, albeit in a limited domain (Roederer-Rynning & Schimmelfennig, 2012).

The Treaty of Brussels (1975) further strengthened the EP's role, granting it the power to reject the entire budget, a right it exercised for the first time in 1979. Although rarely used, this power foreshadowed the EP's later legislative and budgetary authority. The establishment of the European Court of Auditors through

this treaty also reinforced the institutional framework for financial accountability within the European Communities, highlighting the growing importance of sound financial management in European governance (Roederer-Rynning & Schimmelfennig, 2012; Schout et al., 2020).

Table 1. Key Milestones in the Expansion of the EP's Budgetary Powers

Period	Treaty	Description
1970 and 1975	Budgetary Treaties	These treaties distinguished between compulsory and non-compulsory expenditures. They allowed the EP to amend the latter.
1986	Single European Act (SEA)	The SEA introduced the cooperation procedure, increasing the EP's legislative influence, including on budgetary matters, though the final decision remained with the Council.
1992	Maastricht Treaty	The Maastricht Treaty introduced the co-decision procedure, significantly enhancing the EP's legislative role. While the EP's direct influence on the budget remained limited, the treaty's provisions on Economic and Monetary Union strengthened the Parliament's role in fiscal oversight.
1997	Amsterdam Treaty	The Amsterdam Treaty extended co-decision to more policy areas and strengthened the EP's role in certain budgetary matters, particularly in relation to the Common Foreign and Security Policy and Justice and Home Affairs.
2001	Nice Treaty	The Nice Treaty further extended the EP's competences, though significant budgetary authority remained concentrated within the Council.

The Single European Act (SEA) of 1986 marked another major step in the evolution of the EP's budgetary powers. Although the SEA primarily focused on completing the single market, it also introduced the cooperation procedure, allowing the EP to propose amendments to legislation, including those with budgetary

implications. While the Council retained the final say, this development led to greater active involvement of the EP in the legislative process (Hix & Høyland, 2011). From this perspective, the SEA can be seen as a precursor to the broader changes that would be formalized by the Maastricht Treaty.

The Maastricht Treaty (1992), through the introduction of the co-decision procedure, gave the Parliament equal legislative power with the Council in many policy areas. However, budgetary matters remained somewhat outside the scope of co-decision, limiting the EP's ability to directly influence budgetary decisions (Benedetto, 2013). Nevertheless, the Maastricht Treaty laid the groundwork for future expansions of the EP's budgetary powers, particularly in the context of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), where fiscal oversight and budgetary discipline became increasingly important (Hix & Høyland, 2011).

The Lisbon Treaty and the Reconfiguration of Budgetary Authority

The Lisbon Treaty, which came into force in December 2009, represents the most significant reform of the EP budgetary powers to date. This treaty marked a decisive shift in the balance of power between EU institutions, particularly in budgetary matters, where the EP became an equal authority alongside the Council (Piris, 2010).

Under the Lisbon Treaty, the distinction between compulsory and non-compulsory expenditures was eliminated, further increasing the EP's influence over EU finances. The treaty also introduced the Multiannual Financial Framework as a legally binding instrument that sets the EU's long-term budgetary priorities. The EP gained

the right to approve the MFF, although the Council retained the final decision-making power regarding the specific allocation of funds within it (De Feo, 2020). This reform allowed the EP to exercise greater control over the entire budget, leading to an implicit increase in its legislative and political authority within the EU (Benedetto, 2013).

The Lisbon Treaty also introduced the concept of "budgetary discipline," regulated under Article 310 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). This provision requires that the EU budget be balanced and that no commitment or payment appropriations exceed the amounts set in the MFF. The principle of budgetary discipline has significant implications for the EP's budgetary powers, as it compels the Parliament to make its decisions within the constraints of the MFF when negotiating the annual budget. This condition tempered the EP's ambitions, as it must balance its policy goals with the fiscal realities set by the MFF (Piris, 2010).

At the same time, the Lisbon Treaty strengthened the EP's role in overseeing budget implementation. The Parliament was granted enhanced powers to monitor the European Commission's management of EU funds and to hold the Commission accountable through the discharge procedure. This process allows the EP to assess whether the budget has been implemented effectively and in compliance with EU law, giving the Parliament a decisive role in ensuring transparency and accountability in the use of EU funds (Fabbrini, 2013).

Article 314 TFEU defines the procedure for adopting the EU's annual budget and is crucial for understanding the role of the European Parliament in the post-Lisbon budgetary process. This

Article codifies the ordinary legislative procedure in budgetary matters, outlining the steps that the European Commission, the Council, and the European Parliament must follow in preparing, negotiating, and adopting the budget (European Union, 2012).

According to Article 314, the budgetary procedure begins with a proposal from the European Commission, which is then presented to both the Council and the EP for review. The procedure emphasizes the equal role of the EP and the Council, with both institutions required to agree on the budget. If the EP proposes amendments to the Council's position, a conciliation committee is convened to reach a compromise. If an agreement is reached, the budget is adopted according to the terms of the compromise. If no agreement is reached, the Commission must present a new draft budget, and the process starts again (European Union, 2012).

The procedure outlined in Article 314 demonstrates that the EP plays a crucial role through its budgetary powers. Since the Lisbon Treaty, the EP has gained increased negotiating power in relation to other EU institutions. The requirement for the EP's agreement in the adoption of community budgetary measures places the Parliament in a position to negotiate on equal terms with the Council, using its veto power to promote amendments aligned with its policy priorities.

On the other hand, this procedure introduces greater transparency and accountability in the budgetary process. As an institution composed of members directly elected by EU citizens, the EP has an obligation to ensure that the budget reflects public concerns and priorities (Roederer-Rynning & Schimmelfennig, 2012).

At the same time, Article 314 TFEU, in conjunction with the discharge procedure, provides the EP with stronger oversight

mechanisms. This has strengthened the EP's capacity to monitor budget execution, ensuring that EU funds are used efficiently and in line with sound financial management principles (Crum, 2019). To better understand the scope of this responsibility, the next section will explain the major role the MFF plays within the overall logic of European governance.

The Multiannual Financial Framework: Institutionalizing the EP's Role

Before the Lisbon Treaty came into effect (December 1, 2009), there was no legal basis in the treaties for establishing the procedure for adopting the MFF. The first MFF (1988–1992) was created through an Interinstitutional Agreement between the Council, the Commission, and the European Parliament. Prior to the 2013–2020 MFF, the EU institutions created "financial perspectives" to outline the Union's multiannual priorities (Todorescu, 2023).

Article 312 TFEU stipulates that the MFF must cover at least five years. By imposing this minimum period, the Treaty aims to maintain the EU's fiscal discipline by setting the spending top limits for commitment and payment appropriations. These maximums prevent excessive spending while allowing structured management of long-term projects. In this sense, the MFF can be seen as both a financial planning tool and an institutional coordination mechanism between EU entities (Heinemann et al., 2010).

Adopting the MFF requires the consensus of all major EU institutions: the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Parliament. This institutional interaction is necessary to ensure the MFF's legitimacy, as it reflects both the EU's collective

interests and the various priorities of individual member states (Becker, 2019).

Unlike national budgets, which are subject to annual review and may face short-term political pressures, the MFF provides a stable financial framework over several years. This long-term cycle is important for EU-funded projects with long-term goals, such as infrastructure investments, research initiatives, and regional development programs.

However, the rigidity of the MFF has drawn criticism, as it limits the EU's ability to respond flexibly to unforeseen challenges or shifts in political priorities. For example, the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent eurozone crisis exposed the limitations of a fixed budget framework as the EU struggled to mobilize additional resources to address these crises effectively (Becker et al., 2017). To mitigate these limitations, mechanisms such as the Flexibility Instrument and the Emergency Margin have been introduced, allowing the EU to allocate additional funds beyond the agreed ceilings in response to emergencies (European Commission, 2020).

The last three rounds of MFF negotiations occurred in very different contexts, each with unique challenges shaping the final decisions. In 2006, discussions for the 2007–2013 budget were marked by two major events: the enlargement of the European Union with the accession of 12 new member states and the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by the citizens of the Netherlands and France. Although the EU's enlargement was expected to be a moment of great enthusiasm, the rejection of the Treaty cast doubt on the future of European integration (Schild, 2008).

By 2013, circumstances had changed significantly. Negotiations for the new MFF were heavily influenced by the global economic

crisis, which had severely impacted the European economy. It was also the first time the MFF was negotiated under the new rules introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, which brought new challenges and opportunities to the process (Berkowitz, 2015; Leen, 2015).

In 2020, the negotiation context shifted again, this time under the strong impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The health and economic crisis created an urgent need for recovery across the European Union. Initially, the European Commission aimed for the new MFF to support the EU's transformation into a climate-neutral economy by 2050 under the ambitious Green Deal project (Rubio, 2020). However, the pandemic and the subsequent war in Ukraine reshaped priorities, forcing the EU to adjust its goals and reallocate budgetary resources to address new realities (Todorescu, 2023).

What we can observe is that the MFF's role in European policy planning is particularly evident in its ability to adapt to evolving priorities. Each MFF cycle offers the opportunity to reassess the EU's strategic needs and adjust financial allocations accordingly. This adaptability illustrates how the MFF can be both a stable and dynamic instrument, capable of supporting the EU's long-term strategies while responding to new challenges.

From the European Parliament's perspective, the introduction of the MFF under the Lisbon Treaty represents the institutionalization of the EP's role in shaping the EU's long-term financial planning. The EP's involvement in MFF negotiations allows it to influence the EU's strategic priorities and ensure that the budget reflects the interests of European citizens (De Feo, 2020).

The MFF has also been a significant moment in the EP's efforts to expand its budgetary powers. During the negotiations for the

2014–2020 MFF, the EP succeeded in securing greater flexibility in the EU budget, allowing for the reallocation of funds between different policy areas in response to changing circumstances. This flexibility was further expanded in the 2021–2027 MFF (Schout et al., 2020).

However, the EP's active and decisive presence in MFF negotiations is not without challenges. The process is often marked by intense interinstitutional negotiations, where the EP must navigate between the differing priorities of the Council and the Commission. The EP has leveraged this formal negotiation framework to assert and consolidate its position relative to the other two institutions, using its budgetary powers to secure concessions and influence the final outcome (Roederer-Rynning & Schimmelfennig, 2012).

Finally, the EU crises highlight a trend of marginalizing the EP by member states. For example, the euro crisis led to an increase in intergovernmentalism within the EU, a decision-making model formalized by the Maastricht Treaty and later reinforced by the Lisbon Treaty. This crisis led to a "verticalization" of power, concentrating decisions at the level of the European Council and the Council, resulting in the marginalization of the community method and the European Parliament (Piattoni, 2016). This trend was also observed during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Negotiation Process of the 2021–2027 MFF

The 2021–2027 MFF was particularly important as it had to address the financial gap left by the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU, estimated at approximately €11 billion annually (Bartha, 2018). The European Commission's proposal, presented by Budg-

et Commissioner Günther Oettinger in May 2018, sought to balance the need for continued investment in key areas with the reality of a smaller overall budget.

The political context within the EU also influenced the MFF negotiations. Traditional power structures within the European Parliament (EP), such as the dominance of the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), were declining, while new movements, including Eurosceptic parties, were gaining ground. This shifting power dynamic added an extra layer of complexity to the negotiations (Bartha, 2018).

Institutional Positions

The European Commission's Proposal

The negotiations for the 2021–2027 MFF officially began on May 2, 2018, when the European Commission, under the leadership of President Jean-Claude Juncker and Budget Commissioner Günther Oettinger, presented a proposal for a pragmatic and modern budget. The Commission's proposal included a financial framework of approximately €1.3 trillion, representing a substantial increase from the previous MFF, and suggested a reorientation of spending priorities toward areas such as external security, migration management, and digitalization. The Commission emphasized the need to balance these new priorities with traditional ones like the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Policy but proposed a gradual reduction in funding for these areas (Becker, 2019).

For the new financial cycle, the goal was to address both the financial shortfall caused by Brexit and the need to finance new priorities such as climate change and digital transformation (De Feo,

2020). In this context, the Commission proposed increasing the budget to 1.11% of the EU's Gross National Income (GNI), a modest increase viewed by some but a point of contention among member states. Net contributors such as Denmark, the Netherlands, and Austria argued that the budget should be reduced in line with a post-Brexit, smaller EU (Bartha, 2018).

The Commission also proposed the introduction of new own resources, such as a plastic waste tax and a digital tax, to diversify the EU's revenue sources and reduce dependence on member state contributions. However, these proposals faced strong resistance from some member states, particularly those with significant national interests in protecting their fiscal autonomy (European Commission, 2018).

The UK's departure, as the second-largest net contributor to the EU budget, reduced the EU's GNI by approximately 15%, creating an estimated annual budget shortfall of €13–14 billion. This financial gap further complicated the negotiations, placing additional pressure on the remaining EU members to contribute more or find ways to reduce spending (Becker, 2019).

The European Parliament

In its interim report on the MFF, the EP expressed concern that the proposed budget was insufficient to meet the EU's ambitions and called for an increase to 1.3% of GNI (European Parliament, 2018). The Parliament's position was clear: without adequate funding, the EU would be unable to meet its promises, particularly in areas such as climate change and social inclusion. The Parliament also emphasized the importance of introducing new own resources to reduce the Union's dependence on national contributions and

to ensure a more sustainable financial model (European Parliament, 2020).

Antonio Tajani, as rapporteur from the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO), consistently stressed the need to reform the procedures for adopting the MFF and the EU's own resource system to overcome recurring deadlocks in budget negotiations. He warned that the Union's budget must be sufficient to finance the competencies attributed to it by the treaties, which had increased significantly over time (European Parliament Committee on Constitutional Affairs, 2020a). Additionally, AFCO advocated for the swift introduction of genuine own resources, in accordance with Article 311 of the TFEU, to ensure a European budget capable of addressing challenges and delivering meaningful results for European citizens (European Parliament Committee on Constitutional Affairs, 2020a).

Another important aspect of the EP's position was promoting transparency and democratic accountability in managing the Union's public funds. AFCO highlighted ongoing difficulties in obtaining responses from the Council due to a lack of cooperation, which hindered the proper evaluation of the use of approximately €6 billion in public funds (European Parliament Committee on Constitutional Affairs, 2021).

The EP's 2020 resolution emphasized the need to reform the EU's own resource system to ensure a sustainable budget and reduce reliance on GNI-based contributions from member states. Proposed new own resources included a common consolidated corporate tax base, a digital services tax, a financial transaction tax, revenues from the emissions trading scheme, a contribution for plastics, and a carbon border adjustment mechanism (European Parliament, 2020).

The European Council and Member States

Within the budgetary procedure defined by the Lisbon Treaty, following the Commission's submission of the MFF draft, the Council of the European Union created dedicated working structures to facilitate negotiations. These structures included an ad hoc working group on the MFF under the General Affairs Council, which was the primary negotiating body. The European Council, representing member states, became the arena for the most intense negotiations (Becker, 2019). The Council's role was to reconcile the divergent interests of member states, which ranged from the fiscal conservatism of the "Frugal Group" (Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden) to demands for increased funding for cohesion and agriculture from Southern and Eastern European countries (Fabbrini, 2023).

Member states were divided into three main groups: the status quo conservatives, who sought to maintain current funding levels for agricultural and cohesion policies; moderate modernizers, who supported modernizing EU policies but with adequate funding for traditional areas; and the fiscally rigid group, which called for reduced spending and rejected any increase in national contributions (Becker, 2019).

One of the most controversial issues during the negotiations was the level of flexibility in the MFF. The EP and several member states supported greater flexibility to allow the reallocation of funds in response to unforeseen challenges such as the pandemic. However, other states were concerned that too much flexibility could lead to a lack of financial discipline and undermine the predictability of EU funding (Benedetto, 2019).

The negotiation process for the MFF was significantly influenced by the rotating presidencies of the Council of the European Union. Each presidency, held by a different member state every six months, played a relevant role in guiding discussions, mediating between divergent national interests, and pushing negotiations toward consensus.

Austria's presidency (second half of 2018) focused on establishing a "negotiating box", a draft document outlining possible compromises on key issues. The first version of this box was sent to member states on November 30, 2018, and discussed at a political level in the General Affairs Council on December 11, 2018. This box already contained all the horizontal themes and substantive priorities that would be included in the European Council's conclusions at the end of negotiations. However, substantial agreements were not reached due to member states' divergent positions on essential budgetary areas such as cohesion policy and the CAP (Becker, 2019).

Romania took over the presidency in the first half of 2019, at a time when member states' positions were still highly divergent. Despite Romania's efforts to narrow the differences, member states' rigidity on critical budgetary issues made it difficult to advance negotiations significantly. This period highlighted the difficulty of reaching a consensus, particularly given entrenched positions on funding levels for traditional policies versus new priorities (Becker, 2019).

Finland's presidency (second half of 2019) played a more decisive role in negotiations, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that would ensure sufficient funding for the EU's new priorities while maintaining fiscal responsibility. Under Finland's leadership, discussions on the MFF structure and the reform of the

EU's own resource system advanced, although substantial compromises were left to subsequent presidencies (Becker, 2019).

Croatia's presidency (first half of 2020) faced the unprecedented challenge of negotiating the final stages of the MFF amid the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis completely shifted the focus of the negotiations, with member states recognizing the need for an extraordinary financial response. Croatia's presidency was instrumental in advancing discussions on the Next Generation EU (NGEU) recovery fund, paving the way for the final agreement (European Council, 2020).

The Alteration of the Negotiation Environment

The negotiations for the 2021–2027 MFF were marked by a series of challenges that tested the EU's capacity to reach a consensus. The most significant challenges that altered the environment of the MFF negotiations were:

- (1) *Brexit*: The financial gap left by the United Kingdom's departure forced difficult decisions on where to cut spending and how to generate additional revenue.
- (2) *COVID-19 Pandemic*: The economic crisis triggered by the pandemic led to the creation of the NGEU, introducing new complexities into the negotiations.
- (3) *Divergent National Interests*: The varying priorities of member states, ranging from budgetary restraint to demands for increased cohesion funding, made it difficult to reach an agreement that satisfied all parties.

One of the most complex elements discussed was the impact of Brexit on the EU budget. The assumption was that the

withdrawal of the UK, which had been the second-largest net contributor, would reduce EU revenues and create a financial deficit estimated between €13 and €14 billion annually. This perspective added further tensions to the negotiations, as member states had to discuss ways to offset this deficit, either by increasing their own contributions or by cutting spending (Becker, 2019).

However, it was the COVID-19 pandemic that hit Europe at the most critical moments of the MFF negotiations and completely changed the game. The pandemic caused a major economic contraction, with the EU's GDP forecasted to drop by 8.3% in 2020. In this context, the EU prioritized economic recovery, emergency assistance, public health spending, and investments in research and innovation to rebuild the economy and internal market to pre-crisis levels and to build resilience against future cross-border threats (Echebarria Fernández, 2020).

European leaders recognized the need for an exceptional financial response to address the economic crisis generated by the pandemic. In this context, alongside the MFF, the NGEU recovery fund was created, a €750 billion package aimed at supporting the member states most affected by the crisis, with a special focus on green and digital transitions (European Council, 2020). The exceptional nature of this recovery fund lies in the fact that it allowed the European Commission, for the first time, to issue joint debt on the capital market, amounting to €750 billion.

The integration of NGEU into the MFF negotiations was not simple. Although all European actors agreed on the need for a recovery fund, opinions differed significantly regarding the distribution of funds. For example, the northern countries, known as the "Frugal Four" (Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden),

demanded more loans and stricter conditions, while southern European states, heavily impacted by the pandemic, pushed for grants with fewer conditions (European Council, 2020).

In this framework, NGEU represented a major challenge to the solidarity of EU member states (Echebarria Fernández, 2020, p. 1400). This financial instrument was adopted after intense political battles among EU member state leaders, divided into three distinct regional coalitions: the Frugal coalition (northern countries), the Solidarity coalition (southern European countries, alongside France and Germany), and the Sovereignty coalition (Poland and Hungary). These coalitions adopted different and coherent approaches to crisis management, shaping the policy-making process in 2020 (see Fabbrini, 2023).

In the end, a compromise was reached: €390 billion in grants and €360 billion in loans. This decision was presented as an example of European solidarity but also revealed deep divisions within the EU regarding fiscal policy and shared responsibility (European Council, 2020).

Even after the European Council reached a compromise, the European Parliament was not fully satisfied. In December 2020, the EP expressed concern that the MFF would not adequately address the EU's long-term challenges (European Parliament, 2020). The Parliament criticized cuts to important programs such as Horizon Europe and Erasmus+, which it viewed as essential for the EU's future competitiveness and social cohesion.

A significant point of divergence was the conditionality of the rule of law. The Parliament also insisted on the need for a strong mechanism that would condition the allocation of EU funds with respect to democratic principles and the rule of law (European

Parliament, 2020). This issue became a major point of tension between the Sovereignty coalition and the rest of the EU. Essentially, Hungary and Poland, the leaders of the Sovereignty coalition, opposed conditionality mechanisms that would link access to NGEU funds to adherence to the rule of law principles. This opposition triggered a conflict that was resolved only through a temporary compromise, allowing the NGEU program to be adopted in December 2020 (Fabbrini, 2023). The EP secured an agreement stipulating that the rule of law mechanism would be applied from January 2021, with the possibility of suspending funds for member states violating EU values (European Council, 2020).

The final negotiations between the European Parliament and the European Council led to an agreement that included additional funds for essential programs, the introduction of new own resources, and a commitment to a mid-term review of the MFF. These concessions were necessary to gain the Parliament's approval and to enable the implementation of the MFF and NGEU from the beginning of 2021 (European Parliament, 2020).

The Role of the Interinstitutional Agreement and the Rule of Law Regulation

The Interinstitutional Agreement (IIA) and the Rule of Law Regulation were key elements of the final MFF package. The IIA, agreed upon by the European Parliament, the Council, and the Commission, set out how the MFF and NGEU would be implemented, including the roles of each institution and the mechanisms for ensuring transparency and accountability (European Parliament, 2020). This agreement also formalized the Parliament's involvement

in monitoring NGEU funds, ensuring that they would be spent correctly and efficiently.

These agreements, which were reached through negotiations, were seen by the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) as a historic step in the integration process of the European Union. However, AFCO warned that attention still needed to be paid to respecting the principle of sincere cooperation in the implementation of all elements of the MFF package and emphasized that adherence to the EU's fundamental values is essential for accessing funds (European Parliament Committee on Constitutional Affairs, 2020b).

The Rule of Law Regulation introduced a mechanism to protect the EU budget, ensuring that funds are not used in member states that violate the EU's fundamental principles. According to this regulation, the European Commission can suspend payments to member states if breaches of the rule of law threaten the EU's financial interests (European Parliament, 2020). This was a significant victory for the European Parliament, which had long advocated for such safeguards.

The final agreement on NGEU included a mix of grants and loans, with a significant portion of the funds allocated to green and digital transitions. This outcome was seen as a major success for the European Parliament, which had pushed for the inclusion of ambitious climate targets and greater flexibility in the use of funds (Benedetto, 2013).

Final Remarks

Despite the challenges, the final agreement on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027 represented a significant achievement

for the EU. The current MFF covers the period 2021–2027 and includes a financial package of €1.216 trillion, complemented by the extraordinary recovery instrument Next Generation EU, amounting to €807 billion (see Table 2). The agreement featured increased funding for climate action, digital innovation, and social cohesion, as well as new own resources to diversify the EU's revenue streams (European Commission, 2023; European Council, 2023).

**Table 2. Allocation of Community
Budgetary Resources through the MFF (2021–2027)**

Chapters	MFF	NGEU	TOTAL
1. Single market, innovation, and digital sector	€149.5bn	€11.5bn	€161.0bn
2. Cohesion, resilience, and values	€426.7bn	€776.5bn	€1,203.2bn
3. Natural resources and environment	€401.0bn	€18.9bn	€419.9bn
4. Migration and border management	€25.7bn	-	€25.7bn
5. Security and defense	€14.9bn	-	€14.9bn
6. Neighborhood and the world	€110.6bn	-	€110.6bn
7. European public administration	€82.5bn	-	€82.5 bn
TOTAL	€1,210.9bn	€806.9bn	€2,017.8bn

Source: European Commission (2023)

NGEU is based on a fairly complex legal structure consisting of several secondary acts of EU law. These include the EU Recovery Instrument (EURI) and the Own Resources Decision (ORD), which authorize the financing of both NGEU and the MFF (2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework). In addition, NGEU is tied to an interinstitutional agreement between the European Parliament, the Council, and the Commission, which provides for the introduction of new European taxes to repay the joint debts (Fabbrini, 2022).

We can affirm that through the entire framework, NGEU has established a new system of economic governance in the EU based on the idea that the EU must lead economic recovery through new financial support mechanisms for member states. The measures adopted under this massive recovery program were necessary for stabilizing the European economy in the face of the pandemic, but they also highlighted ongoing challenges regarding solidarity among member states and the efficiency of recovery measures. By issuing joint debt, the EU overcomes the fundamental issue of its budget, which was largely financed through transfers from member states. This provides the EU with increased fiscal autonomy, allowing it to stabilize the macroeconomic cycle and pursue European public objectives, such as environmental protection and social inclusion (Fabbrini, 2022).

In this context, the role of the European Parliament within NGEU and the 2021–2027 MFF was complex yet still limited, primarily focused on oversight and consultation. While Parliament succeeded in influencing the increase in funding for EU programs and advocated for greater accountability in the use of funds, its influence on the actual implementation of these funds remains constrained by the institutional structures of the EU (Fabbrini, 2023).

Through the Lisbon Treaty, the European Parliament holds two essential functions in the EU budgetary process: the power to approve the Union's annual budget and the right to consent to the MFF. While Parliament can consent to or reject MFF proposals, it does not have the power to directly modify the budgetary figures proposed by the Council and Commission. This means that Parliament must negotiate intensively to secure concessions and be ready to use the threat of rejection to impose its viewpoint. Throughout

the 2021–2027 MFF negotiations, the EP used this power to gain important concessions from the Council and the Commission, including additional funding for essential programs and the introduction of a rule-of-law conditionality mechanism.

Additionally, the diversity of opinions and interests within Parliament can complicate internal negotiations and the formation of a united front against the Council. Moreover, the fact that the EP must collaborate with two other powerful institutions – the Council and the Commission – sometimes limits its ability to achieve all its proposed objectives.

The 2021–2027 MFF negotiations demonstrated that the European Parliament is not merely a passive observer in the EU budgetary process but an active and influential actor. Throughout the negotiations, the EP managed to assert its views and significantly modify both the Commission's initial proposal and the Council's position. Moreover, the Parliament has shown that it can play a relevant role in mediating conflicts among member states by offering compromise solutions that ensure the stability and cohesion of the Union. For example, its active involvement in the final negotiations was crucial in reaching an agreement on the EU's own resources, a critical aspect of the Union's financial future.

Likely encouraged by these successes, AFCO sees the institutional and procedural reforms discussed at the Conference on the Future of Europe as an opportunity to strengthen the European Parliament's role in decision-making processes concerning the MFF and own resources (European Parliament Committee on Constitutional Affairs, 2020c).

The lessons learned from the 2021–2027 MFF negotiation process should prompt the EU to define better its approaches to

the challenges that will arise in discussions for the future 2028–2034 MFF. One of the most pressing issues is balancing the demands of new and emerging priorities with the need to continue supporting traditional policy areas, such as agriculture and cohesion (D'Alfonso et al., 2024). Another major challenge is ensuring the long-term sustainability of EU finances, particularly considering the debt contracted through NGEU. The EU will need to develop strategies for repaying this debt without compromising its ability to finance other essential areas (De Feo, 2020).

As political discussions open the prospect of future EU enlargements, the MFF will also need to be flexible enough to accommodate the integration of new member states. This requires careful planning to ensure that the MFF supports cohesion and stability within the Union while effectively integrating new members (D'Alfonso et al., 2024).

Ultimately, the concept of shared and responsible sovereignty, as discussed by Piattoni (2016), will become increasingly important as the EU faces these challenges. The future MFF must reflect a balance between national sovereignty and collective action, ensuring that the EU can address common challenges while respecting the diversity of its member states (De Feo, 2020; D'Alfonso et al., 2024).

In all these perspectives, the European Parliament has the opportunity to solidify its role as an active player, even within the intergovernmental limits of the Lisbon Treaty. By insisting on adequate funding for flagship European initiatives and supporting a robust mechanism for protecting the rule of law, the Parliament has demonstrated that it is a guardian of the interests of European citizens and the fundamental values of the Union. This

role can be further exploited and strengthened in the negotiations for the future MFF.

References

- Bartha, D. (2018). *Towards a compromise: political debates related to the EU budget*. Center for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy [https://www.ceid.hu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/MFF-prestudy-1.pdf]
- Becker, P. (2019). A New Budget for the EU: Negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027. *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Research Paper No. 11*. https://doi.org/10.18449/2019RP11
- Becker, S., Bauer, M. W., & De Feo, A. (2017). The new politics of the European Union budget: Background, key findings, and outlook. In S. Becker, M. W. Bauer, & A. De Feo (Eds.), *The new politics of the European Union budget* (pp. 15–31). Nomos. https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845278032-1
- Benedetto, G. (2013). The EU budget after Lisbon: rigidity and reduced spending? In *Journal of Public Policy*, 33(3), p. 345–369. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X13000172.
- Benedetto, G. (2019). The European Parliament as a Budgetary Extractor since the Lisbon Treaty. *Journal of European Integration*, 43(2), 329–345. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2019.1599374.
- Berkowitz P., Breska E. von, Rubianes A. C., Pieńkowski, J. (2015). The Impact of the Economic and Financial Crisis on The Reform of Cohesion Policy 2008–2013. European Commission. *Regional Working Paper*. https://doi.org/10.2776/25670
- Crum, B. (2018). Parliamentary accountability in multilevel governance: What role for parliaments in post-crisis EU economic governance? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(2), 268–286. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1363270
- D'Alfonso, A., Dobрева, A., Kowald, K., Mileusnic, M., Mazur, S., Peters, T., Pari, M., & Toft, S. (2024). *Budgetary Outlook for the European Union*. European Parliamentary Research Service. https://doi.org/10.2861/454079
- De Feo, A. (2020). The Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027: Ambition or Continuity? In B. Laffan & A. De Feo (Eds.), *EU Financing for Next Decade* (pp. 1–13). European University Institute.

- Echebarria Fernández, J. (2020). A Critical Analysis on the European Union's Measures to Overcome the Economic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *European Papers*, 5(3), 1399–1423. <https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/437>
- European Commission. (2018). *Proposal for a Council decision on the system of own resources of the European Union* (COM(2018) 325 final). Brussels: European Commission [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:d7369bdc-4ed9-11e8-be1d-01aa75ed71a1.0003.02/DOC_1&format=PDF]
- European Commission. (2023). *Negotiation process of the 2021–2027 long-term EU budget & NextGenerationEU*. [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/long-term-eu-budget/2021-2027/negotiations_en]
- European Council. (2023). *The EU long-term budget: Multiannual financial framework (MFF) 2021–2027*. [<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/the-eu-long-term-budget-mff-2021-2027/>]
- European Parliament. (2018). *Interim report on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027 – Parliament's position with a view to an agreement* (P8_TA(2018) 0449). [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0449_EN.pdf]
- European Parliament. (2020). *New MFF, Own Resources and Recovery Plan* (P9_TA(2020)0124).
- European Parliament Committee on Constitutional Affairs. (2020a). *Opinion on Guidelines for the 2021 Budget – Section III (2019/2213(BUD))*. PE650.505v01-00. Retrieved from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0010_EN.html
- European Parliament Committee on Constitutional Affairs. (2020b). *Opinion on the proposal for a Council regulation laying down the multiannual financial framework for the years 2021 to 2027 (2018/0166(APP))*. PE660.284v02-00. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0010_EN.html
- European Parliament Committee on Constitutional Affairs. (2020c). *Opinion on the Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a Recovery and Resilience Facility (COM(2020)0408 – C9-0150/2020 – 2020/0104(COD))*. PE658.843v02-00. Retrieved from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0010_EN.html
- European Parliament Committee on Constitutional Affairs. (2021). *Opinion on discharge in respect of the implementation of the general budget of*

- the European Union for the financial year 2019, Section II – European Council and Council (2020/2142(DEC)). PE660.215v02-00. Retrieved from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0010_EN.html
- European Union. (2012). *Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*. Official Journal of the European Union, C 326, 47–390.
- Fabbrini, F. (2022). Next Generation EU: Legal Structure and Constitutional Consequences. REBUILD Centre – Working Paper 3.
- Fabbrini, S. (2023). Going beyond the pandemic: ‘Next Generation EU’ and the politics of sub-regional coalitions. *Comparative European Politics*, 21, 64–81. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-022-00302-8>
- Heinemann, F., Mohl, P., & Osterloh, S. (2010). Reforming the EU Budget: Reconciling Needs with Political-Economic Constraints. *Journal of European Integration*, 32(1), 59–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036330903375149>
- Hix, S., & Høyland, B. (2011). *The political system of the European Union* (3rd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Leen A. R. (2015). The Multiannual Financial Framework of the European Union: A Political Power Game. *Athens Journal of Social Sciences*, pp. 7–18. <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajss.3-1-1>
- Nugent, N. (2017). *The government and politics of the European Union* (8th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Núñez Ferrer, J., & Katarivas, M. (2014). *What are the effects of the EU budget: Driving force or drop in the ocean?* CEPS Special Report No. 86. Centre for European Policy Studies.
- Piattoni, S. (2016). The European Union between Intergovernmentalism and 'Shared and Responsible Sovereignty'. *Government and Opposition*, 52(3), 385–411. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.48>
- Piris, J.-C. (2010). *The Lisbon Treaty: a legal and political analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Roederer-Rynning, C., & Schimmelfennig, F. (2012). Bringing Codecision to Agriculture: A Hard Case of Parliamentarization. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 19(7), 951–968. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2011.652902>
- Rubio, E. (2020). *MFF Negotiations: Towards the End?* Jacques Delors Institute. [<https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/mff-negotiations-towards-the-end-2/>].

- Schild, J. (2008). How To Shift The EU's Spending Priorities? The Multi-Annual Financial Framework 2007–13 In Perspective. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15(4), pp. 531–549, DOI: 10.1080/13501760801996725
- Schout, A., Molthof, L., & Hollander, S. (2020). The Multiannual Financial Framework: The Search for Flexibility and Recognised Effectiveness. European Policy Centre.
- Todorescu, D. (2023). A financial perspective on European citizenship: MFF and its developments 2004–2027. In M. Alexandrescu (ed.) *Citizens of the European Union. Status, Identity and Beyond*. Presa Universitară Clujeană, p. 113–123.

Part 2

Democratic Participation and Electoral Manifestations

Participatory Democracy and the Conference on the Future of Europe. Can the EU Institutions Translate Citizens' Ideas into Concrete Action and Be a Voice of Reform?

*Natalia CUGLEŞAN**

Introduction

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CFoE) represented one of the first genuinely transnational initiatives that allowed citizens across the European Union to participate in the democratic reform of the EU. Announced by President Emmanuel Macron in an open letter to European citizens in 2019, the French President called for a Conference of Europe based on a wide range of consultations (Johansson & Raunio, 2022, p. 283); the Conference on the Future of Europe debuted on 9 May 2021 and ended a year later. However, the process was not without challenges. First, the pan-European consultation process was delayed by one year due to the COVID-19

* Dr. Natalia Cugleşan is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of International Studies and Contemporary History of the Faculty of History and Philosophy (Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9713-6785>

pandemic and ran only for one year instead of two. Second, the meetings followed a virtual format due to the COVID-19 restrictions, which did not allow the attendance of many people and probably discouraged participation. Second, EU institutions and member states were divided on how to implement the outcome of this participatory and deliberative exercise and were caught in the dilemma if the results could be implemented without treaty reform. Third, there was limited media attention, and the entire process was overshadowed by the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which diverted the attention of the EU. And not lastly, participation was below expectations, with only 50.000 active users on the Multilingual platform.

Although the CFoE represents the first major initiative to reform the EU after 2007 by "following a different logic, format and legal basis than in the past" (Alemanno, 2021, p. 2), it was not the first initiative of the EU to embark on a democratic innovation path. In 2018, through the European Citizens Consultation (EEC), the EU aimed to consult the citizens on the future of the EU. The EEC were to be organised by the European Commission and the member states. The European Commission launched an online survey open from May 2018 until May 2019, but only 50.000 people responded (Stratulat & Butcher, 2018). The member states embraced the flexibility card regarding the format of the events, timeline or agenda (Stratulat & Butcher, 2018). Most EU member states concluded the consultation in late 2018 to meet the calendar and discuss the outcome in the December 2018 European Council context.

However, the European citizens' consultations were a somewhat flawed process. First, the Commission wanted to play a consistent role in the project and introduced the Citizen's dialogues,

a distinct participatory instrument which created additional confusion among participants. Second, the EEC lacked a common identity and was unstructured and underfunded, with the member states using a different brand for the organised events. Third, member states were reluctant to use the EU questionnaire, and the consultation results might not produce a coherent message for the policy-makers (Stratulat & Butcher, 2018). Finally, member states have failed to take action and create cohesive media strategies to promote and attract citizens' engagement. Additionally, without a unified approach to the Future of Europe project, the citizens' consultations could include any events organised by the member states.

The CFoE differed significantly from the 2018–2019 experiment in that it followed a more structured format. The consultation process involved a hybrid design, incorporating a Multilingual Platform as a central tool to encourage participation and collect input from European citizens. The EU recognised the importance of creating a functional and user-friendly platform. According to Zheng, these platforms must incorporate specific tools and features, like discussion forums or online chatting, to enable effective participation (Zheng, 2017, p. 428). The Multi-lingual Platform was created to be an interactive tool that enables citizens and stakeholders to share their ideas and events horizontally while automatically translating their input (Alemanno, 2021, p. 14). This approach has created a transnational space for the production of ideas and dialogue among the citizens, transcending national boundaries and eliminating language barriers.

Nevertheless, the Multilingual Digital Platform had its shortcomings. As Alberto Alemanno evidenced, the platform suffered from a visibility deficit, unequal access, and a lack of representativeness

of the collected input (Alemanno, 2021, p. 15). Moreover, it attracted individuals with strong EU or anti-EU feelings. Available in the 24 official languages of the EU, the platform enabled EU citizens to advance ideas and respond to ideas by placing comments, advertising or live streaming the events organised in the framework of the CFoE. It also aimed to capture input from just countries outside the EU. It was an essential tool as only a handful of EU countries organised national panels designed by following the criteria used by the EU to manage the European panels. Also, the input served for the Citizens Panels and the Conference Plenary.

The second pivotal component of this pan-European participatory democratic exercise included four Citizens Panels¹, bringing together 800 citizens. These panels were organised around specific themes (democracy and the rule of law; climate change and the environment; economy, social justice and digital transformation; the EU in the world), allowing citizens to deliberate and propose ideas within these areas. This was a more than welcome opportunity, as citizens have fewer avenues for participation compared to organised interests. Establishing a stronger connection with EU citizens is now crucial more than ever, given that 170 million European citizens live in countries where populist or Eurosceptic parties are in power (Sgueo, 2020, p. 5).

However, evaluations of e-participation tools show that the EU needs to address the barriers affecting citizens' participation across EU countries. According to a report by the European Parliament on the challenges to e-participation, one of the major barriers

¹ For more information on the structure and work of the Citizen, visit the page: European Citizens' Panels - Conference on the Future of Europe (archive-it.org)

to e-democracy is the digital divide in terms of infrastructure and experience with e-participation, as well as a general lack of interest in policy-making (Lironi, 2016, p. 50). These initiatives have not received enough publicity, and the media's lack of interest has resulted in outcomes that have not met expectations. Despite these challenges, the Panels succeeded based on the input from the Multi-lingual Digital Platform and deliberation in the assemblies to generate fresh ideas from the citizens.

The final crucial element of the CFoE was the Conference Plenary. Based on a multi-level governance approach, the plenary reunited representatives from supranational institutions such as the European Parliament, EU Council or European Commission, delegates from the National Parliaments, and citizens from the National and European Citizens Panel. Furthermore, it included members of consultative bodies such as the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions, and other key stakeholders. The role of the Plenary was to discuss the recommendations received from EU citizens via the multiple channels of engagement discussed above and send them to the Executive Board of the Plenary, which takes decisions by consensus based on the work of the Conference.

In this context, considering the substantial role of EU institutions in the CFoE project as a pan-European participatory initiative, the paper examines the extent to which EU decision-making actors, including the European Commission, European Parliament, and the member states through the EU Council and European Council, were dedicated to implementing the proposals and recommendations put forth by EU citizens. This is particularly important as these entities play a crucial role in translating citizens'

proposals into concrete actions through legislation. The success of such consultation processes largely depends on the accountability of these institutional actors.

The chapter analyses the institutional responses to the proposals put forth by the Working Group² on European Democracy. The Working Group prepared five proposals, but the analysis focuses only on two specific ones (*Citizens information, participation, and youth I and II*) and the measures aimed at strengthening participatory and deliberative democracy. The EU institutions demonstrated strong commitment to the process, with all three institutions signing a Joint Statement in March 2021 to kickstart the EU reshaping process. They were actively involved in the Conference Plenary and co-chaired the Executive Board, responsible for overseeing the work of the Plenary. Additionally, the feedback event organised by the institutional trio in December 2022 with citizens to discuss the follow-up process reflects their dedication.

However, many proposed changes to enhance European democracy required treaty modifications, leading to divisions within the EU institutions. The paper suggests that the European Commission and the European Parliament prioritised European democracy and sought to achieve these goals using existing powers as well as through treaty reforms. On the other hand, the European Council prioritised other issues and was reluctant to support treaty changes due to the lack of political will among EU member states.

The chapter is structured as follows: first, the article discusses the concept of citizen participation and the EU's past experiences

² The Conference Plenary has established nine Working Groups in March 2022. Their role was to lay out draft proposals based on the recommendations from the input via the Citizens and National Panels or the Multi-lingual Platform.

with participatory democracy. The following sections scrutinise the institutional reactions to the recommendations for augmenting participatory democracy.

EU Experimentation with Citizen *E-Participation*

E-participation has emerged as a prominent trend in governmental practices over the past two decades. More governments are developing democratic innovation tools to improve the quality of democratic processes, introduce new participation instruments, increase citizens' satisfaction and foster greater governmental accountability. Originating in the '60s and extended as a practice in the '80s, e-participation tools with the support of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Wirtz et al., 2018, p.2) have become a fashionable instrument used worldwide. Despite the proliferation of these initiatives, there is still a lack of a shared understanding of this concept in the e-participation literature (Peristeras et al., 2009, p.15). However, e-participation is commonly defined as the use of ICT to allow citizens to participate in consultation and dialogue processes with their governments (Medaglia, 2012, p. 346). Additionally, e-participation entails the use of ICT to promote democratic decision-making (Macintosh, 2004), and the interaction between citizens and governmental actors should involve e-information, e-consultation and e-decision-making.

In the last decade, The EU has experienced the introduction of diverse instruments of citizens' e-participatory instruments, such as the Your Voice Consultation Platform, The Citizens Initiative, The European Citizens Consultations or the European panels.

However, the results are mixed. The evidence shows that these tools, although empowering and used as a civic instrument, still need to become a policy instrument. Also, previous experiences with democratic innovations have highlighted that organised interests, rather than ordinary citizens, tend to be the main participants. This trend is highly visible in the case of the European Citizen Initiative. Designed to facilitate EU citizens' engagement in decision-making, the results indicate that organised citizens exploit this participatory tool, as it requires regulatory competencies and organisational and financial capacity (Aichholzer & Rose, 2020, p. 340).

Additional challenges posed by these democratic innovations include their large scale, language diversity, and transnational character (Aichholzer & Rose, 2020, p. 129). The language barrier can be a significant obstacle. The EU addresses language diversity, but not in an all-encompassing approach in the participatory or deliberative tools. The documentation of participatory tools employed at the EU level shows that the EU offers translation of key information in the 24 official languages of the EU. Still, only 25% of the consultation content is translated into other EU official languages, like the Your Voice in Europe instrument (Aichholzer & Rose, 2020, p. 224). Also, for citizens from the new member states, especially from Central and Eastern Europe, the availability of consultation documents in the official national languages leads to greater participation or contribution, as research shows (Aichholzer & Rose, 2020, p. 224). And finally, the language barrier impacts citizens' mobilisation. As such, one of the solutions is to embed the digital translation feature in the e-participation platforms to stimulate greater participation (Aichholzer & Rose, 2020, p. 335).

Due to its transnational character, the EU has struggled to ensure inclusivity in its e-participation mechanisms. The consultation processes often require expertise as many of the issues citizens contribute to are technocratic and regularly mobilise higher educated citizens and exclude those less involved with the EU. Inclusive e-participation processes should design methods that implicate a more diverse EU audience. This should encompass young people, individuals with fewer opportunities or disabilities, and minority groups impacted by EU policies (Panopoulou et al., 2014, p. 209). Embracing this approach will enhance the representativeness of e-participation initiatives and give voice to citizens from various backgrounds.

Inclusiveness and accessibility are closely intertwined. One of the critical challenges to accessibility is the digital divide across EU member states. It is crucial for the EU to avoid the extensive involvement of the "already privileged technology-literate elite" (Panopoulou et al., 2014, p. 209). Therefore, the design of interactive digital platforms should consider the various levels of digital competencies among EU citizens and complement the digital component with offline participatory activities. This issue is particularly significant for citizens from Eastern Europe. According to Eurostat, 43% of Romanians aged 16 to 74 have low digital skills, ranking the lowest among EU citizens, closely followed by Bulgaria with 38% (European Commission, 2020a).

The academic literature on e-participation emphasises the need for governmental actors to create publicity plans to generate interest among citizens and other stakeholders involved in the consultation process. Panopolou et al., in their extensive literature review on the success factors in e-participation efforts or schemes,

show that these communication strategies are a crucial factor, and their role is to explain the "participation process, policy-making stage and roles" (Panopoulou et al., 2014, p. 210). However, the EU has not consistently supplemented its initiatives with publicity or information plans. For example, in the case of the European Citizens Consultations, the EU needed to establish a common identity for the Future of Europe project. It has failed to provide a common name for the action, goal, or methodological approaches to respond to the initiative in the implementation process (Stratulat & Butcher, 2018, p. 40).

Several proposals have been put forward. Due to the EU's distinctive institutional framework, it is difficult to replicate practices directly; hence, successful models must be adapted. Moreover, empowering the European Parliament by fostering connections with citizens and enabling their participation in EU policy-making through digital platforms could serve as additional solutions.

The Response of EU Institutions to Citizens' Proposals in the Area of Participatory Mechanisms and Deliberative Democracy

The preferences of the EU member states

One of the problematic issues of the Conference of the Future of EU was that the member states questioned the "raison d'être of the Conference" (Greubel & Emmanouilidis, 2021, p. 2) and were divided on the role the Conference should adopt, except for France

and Germany. Some countries³ adopted non-papers, stating they did not want the conference to impose legal obligations on member states (Department of European Affairs, 2021). Other countries, such as Romania and Bulgaria, echoed the same sentiments and, together with eleven countries, argued in a non-paper that the implementation process should not involve treaty revision or lead to the emergence of new treaties. They cited the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the external crises at the Eastern border of the EU, specifically the Russian aggression against Ukraine, "have clearly shown how much the EU can deliver in the current Treaty framework" (Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2022). President Klaus Iohannis also expressed opposition to treaty changes, referencing the unsuccessful 2004 Convention on the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe as a cautionary example. Additionally, new member states from Central and Eastern Europe were hesitant to relinquish their sovereignty in new areas further, particularly considering their relatively recent status as new member states.

Given this situation, the European Council did not provide clear guidance on following up on the Conference. Instead, it suggested that each institution should act according to its competencies rather than promoting a joint institutional response (European Parliament, 2024a, p. 23). Additionally, the European Parliament's requests to convene a convention to revise EU treaties were not included in the agenda of the two European Councils held in December 2023 and February 2024 (European Parliament, 2024a, p. 23–24).

³ Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Slovakia, and Sweden

However, it is essential to consider the compatibility between citizens' proposals and their inclusion in the EU Council Strategic Agenda when examining how the European Council responded to citizen feedback. An analysis of the alignment between EU Council priorities and the proposals of the CoFoE shows that there is a low level of convergence in the area of European democracy, with other topics such as digital transformation, climate change or migration taking priority (Drachenberg, 2022, pp. 2–3). This might be due to the attention given to the recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Russian aggression against Ukraine, and challenges the EU is facing, such as digital sovereignty or autonomy. Additionally, the divergent stances of member states on the question of treaty revisions or democratic backsliding in some member states may provide further explanations.

Despite this, the EU member states in the EU Council remained committed to the citizens' agenda. They were unwilling to endorse treaty revisions but were open to taking action within the confines of existing treaties. The EU Council stated that more than 95% of the citizens' proposals could be implemented as part of the current framework (EU Council, 2024). Thus, the EU Council played a key role, especially in the EU legislation process where it has supported the European Commission initiatives.

The European Commission

"Treaties: Making the most of what we have, changing if we need" (European Commission, 2022).

The European Commission has voiced strong support for the EU institutions to act accountably and effectively in translating

citizens' proposals into concrete action. It has also backed achieving this goal within the existing treaties framework while endorsing the European Parliament's call for treaty amendments in the case of innovative proposals. The EC was particularly supportive, as this was the first time since the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty that the European Parliament had the opportunity to take advantage of this power.

The European Commission has demonstrated its efficiency by successfully implementing nearly 95% of the Conference measures by following this approach. Additionally, four out of five new initiatives have been included in the Commission Work Programme for 2023. Out of the 43 initiatives announced last year, 35 were closely linked with the proposals advanced by EU citizens (European Commission, Secretariat General., 2023).

The European Commission has also achieved notable success in the area of European democracy. This can be attributed to the 2019–2024 VdL Commission program, which has prioritised revitalising the European democracy project and implemented numerous initiatives to address this goal. Thus, the Commission has already implemented several initiatives to strengthen participatory democracy that citizens advanced as part of this extended consultation exercise. One noteworthy initiative was the creation of the Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy, which provides expertise to policy-makers and contributes to "enriching the EU knowledge base on participatory and deliberative practices" (European Commission, 2020b). Another notable example was the redesign of the *Have Your Say* portal in 2020, aimed at improving the consultation process at different stages of the legislative process (European Commission, 2020c). Hence, the European

Commission was already proactively strengthening participatory and deliberative democracy.

At the same time, the European Commission was also prepared to explore new areas of action, as the Conference offered a window of opportunity to revamp participatory and deliberative democracy. A key focus was on citizens' panels, which European Union Commission President Ursula von der Leyen emphasised in her 2022 State of the Union Address, stating that "the citizens' panels will become a regular feature of our democratic life" (Von Der Leyen, 2022). As a result, the European Commission has successfully integrated the citizens' panels as a tool of EU policy-making. From December 2022 and April 2023, the Commission organised three new generations of panels on food waste, virtual worlds and learning mobility, engaging 429 participants. The citizens were entrusted with advancing recommendations for legislative revisions and new proposals ahead of their launch by the European Commission (European Commission. Secretariat General, 2023).

Even though specific recommendations were incorporated in the new pieces of legislation, such as the case of the EU Waste Framework Directive and the European Commission, according to vice-president Dubravka Šuica, was "the first executive body anywhere to introduce citizen panels as an integral part of the designing of policy" (European Commission. Secretariat General, 2023), this upgraded tool of deliberative democracy was not immune to criticism. According to Citizens Takeover Europe, a coalition of civil society organisations, problematic were, among others, the lack of a public sphere, with the panels operating in isolation, the inadequate representation of vulnerable groups, and limited space for contestation and deliberation (Citizens Take Over Europe, 2023).

As one of the most important outcomes of the Conference, the citizen panels have continued to be organised in 2024, following the format defined by the European Commission. Over the course of three weekends, citizens convened for three sessions to deliberate on the agenda of energy efficiency established by the European Commission. This highlights the European Commission's preference to align the consultation and deliberation process with the legislative agenda despite the critique that citizens should have a say on the topic of deliberation. One potential explanation is that it incentivises the participation of selected citizens, as they can witness the tangible results of their work. Notably, their ideas are set to be incorporated into a forthcoming EU Recommendation on Energy Efficiency scheduled for late 2024 (European Commission, 2024).

The European Parliament

Of the three institutions, the European Parliament was particularly ambitious in its efforts to incorporate citizens' proposals and was an ardent advocate for treaty change. The proposed revisions aimed to boost European Democracy by advocating for a more substantial role for the European Parliament in EU decision-making, including the right of legislative initiative, establishing a bicameral system for the EU, and introducing requirements for the member states to implement participatory tools. One perspective is that the EU is the institution that represents citizen interests, and the Conference was an opportunity to empower the European Parliament and to "domesticate EU politics and develop the EU in a democratic polity" (Wolff et al., 2021).

Although the topic of European Democracy registered the lowest number of follow-up initiatives of the CFoE and required

the introduction of the highest number of initiatives (10) via treaty change (European Parliament, 2024b, p. 7), the European Parliament has shown a solid commitment to the democratisation agenda. The European Parliament has a track record of supporting the enhancement of participatory mechanisms and has, prior to the CFoE, adopted several resolutions calling for regular consultation processes with citizens by employing a wide range of participatory instruments, as well as the engagement of young people in shaping the future of the EU and the development of an EU civic curriculum as a critical factor stimulating civic participation (Kotanidis & Del Monte, 2022, pp. 6–7).

In the context of the CFoE follow-up initiatives and leveraging the powers granted by the treaties, the EP contributed to the adoption of the *Recommendation on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes* in December 2023, which urged member states to set up participatory and deliberative practices in specific policies.

Additionally, the establishment of the EU Children's Platform, in partnership with the European Parliament, aims to facilitate the participation of children and young people in decision-making and give them a voice in matters that affect them. However, the adoption of an EU Charter for Citizens' Involvement has not been realised.

Conclusion

The Conference on the Future of Europe marked the first transnational participatory democracy initiative. It provided an opportunity for citizens from EU member states to engage in one-year-

long online and offline debates on EU reform. The CFoE was a vivid endeavour as it generated 49 proposals and 326 specific measures. It is considered a successful project, with EU institutions announcing that 75% of implementation measures have been adopted (European Parliament, 2024b, p. 3) as a response to citizens' proposals.

In light of these positive results, the paper has raised the question of the extent of variation across different areas regarding follow-up implementation measures, especially as topics such as Economy, Climate, or Digital were the sectors where most initiatives were adopted. To address this issue, the paper selected the case of European Democracy for analysis. It aimed to explain whether the EU institutions were united in their views and instruments to strengthen participatory and deliberative democracy.

Out of the three institutions being examined, the European Parliament and European Commission demonstrated a solid commitment to translating citizens' proposals into concrete action in the realm of European democracy. The paper has argued that in the case of the European Commission, strengthening EU democracy was a priority under the VdL 2019–2024 Commission programme and had already begun implementing measures to enhance participatory mechanisms. The CFoE offered the ideal platform to continue prioritising this issue on the political agenda. As a result, it has incorporated several follow-up implementation measures in the European Commission Work Programme for 2023 and has adopted the Communication *Putting Vision into Concrete Action*, a blueprint outlining the necessary actions to be taken. Notably, one of the most significant tools was the integration of citizen panels as a regular instrument of EU policy-making.

The European Commission has proven to be an effective actor by adopting a pragmatic approach and implementing follow-up actions within the framework of existing treaties. Furthermore, it remained open to treaty changes for proposals that could only be adopted through revisions, particularly in the area of European democracy, which has seen the highest number of implementation measures necessitating treaty changes. The Commission has demonstrated its close partnership with the European Parliament in supporting these objectives.

The European Parliament was also an institutional actor with a solid record of strengthening participatory processes. For the European Parliament, the CFoE was the perfect opportunity for self-empowerment, and it has been a leading advocate urging treaty changes. The proposals advanced in the area of European democracy envisaged structural reforms of the EU. With the upcoming 2024 European Parliament elections, it was eager to achieve meaningful results to send a message to European citizens that their voices are heard, and the EP is an institution committed to the reform of the European Union.

Finally, the member states failed to reach a consensus on the next steps of the CFoE. Most member states issued non-papers, stipulating that the consultation process should not result in treaty changes or impose legal obligations on the member states. Only a few countries, including France, Germany, and Italy, supported substantial EU reform via treaty change, which would have significant implications for the area of European democracy. Consequently, the European Council acknowledged the citizens' proposals but needed to include on the agenda the call for treaty revisions expressed by the European Parliament. The prevailing lack

of political will amid long-term and overlapping crises, including the crisis of democracy in several member states, did not create a conducive context for a structural reform of the EU.

In summary, European democracy has proved to be a sensitive subject, necessitating numerous treaty changes and facing challenges in gaining the support of member states. Core issues on the political agenda, such as the economy, climate change, migration or digital policies, have been viewed as crucial matters, as demonstrated by the EU Council's work. However, encouraging has been the entire process, which underlined that large-scale participatory consultation can produce meaningful ideas leading to palpable results, even though it was organised during the COVID-19 pandemic and the external crisis at the Eastern border of the EU. Simultaneously, it has served as a valuable learning experience for advancing participatory democracy. Still, the question of what the future holds for EU reform remains uncertain.

References

- Aichholzer, G., & Rose, G. (2020). Experience with digital tools in different types of e-participation. *European E-Democracy in Practice*, 93–140.
- Alemanno, A. (2021). Unboxing the Conference on the Future of Europe: A Preliminary View on its Democratic Raison-d'être and Participatory Architecture. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3925065>
- Citizens Take Over Europe. (2023, February 15). Statement on the European Citizens' Panels. Citizens Take Over Europe. <https://citizenstakeover.eu/blog/statement-on-the-european-citizens-panels/>
- Department of European Affairs. (2021). Non-Paper of 12 EU Member States. Department for European Policies. <http://www.politicheeuropee.gov.it/en/conference-on-the-future-of-europe/documents/non-paper-of-eu-member-states/>

- Drachenberg, R. (2022). The Conference on the Future of Europe and the European Council: A shared policy agenda for the future? EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service.
- EU Council. (2024). Conference on the Future of Europe. Consilium. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>
- European Commission. (2020a). Romania in the Digital Economy and Society Index | Shaping Europe's digital future. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi-romania>
- European Commission. (2020b). About the Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy | Knowledge for policy. https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/participatory-democracy/about_en
- European Commission. (2020c). European Commission revamps its 'Have Your Say' portal*-Press release. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/press-corner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_20_1240/IP_20_1240_EN.pdf
- European Commission. (2022). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Conference on the Future of Europe. Putting Vision into Concrete Action. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0404>
- European Commission. (2024). European Citizens' Panel Energy Efficiency. https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/document/download/769a3a36-6a06-495c-87e0-df5cd1c41712_el?filename=EE%20Factsheet%20Final.pdf
- European Commission. Secretariat General. (2023). Follow-up of the conference on the future of Europe: One year on. Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2792/48110>
- European Parliament. (2024a, March). Key issues in the European Council. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/757805/EPRS_STU\(2024\)757805_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/757805/EPRS_STU(2024)757805_EN.pdf)
- European Parliament. (2024b, May). The follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe – In numbers-. https://conference-followup.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/285641/CoFE%20follow-up%20report_in%20numbers_FINAL.pdf
- Greubel, J., & Emmanouilidis, J. (2021). The debate on the future of Europe has a German problem. 4.

- Johansson, K. M., & Raunio, T. (2022). Shaping the EU's Future? Europarties, European Parliament's Political Groups and the Conference on the Future of Europe. In *European Parliament's Political Groups in Turbulent Times* (pp. 173–197). Springer International Publishing Cham.
- Kotanidis, S., Del Monte, M. (2022). Strengthening citizens' participation How the European Parliament is responding to citizens' expectations. EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service.
- Lironi, E. E. (2016). The Parliament Adopts its Report on e-Participation. ECAS. <https://ecas.org/parliament-adopts-report-e-participation/>
- Macintosh, A. (2004). Characterizing e-participation in policy-making. 37th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, 2004. Proceedings of The, 10-pp.
- Medaglia, R. (2012). eParticipation research: Moving characterization forward (2006–2011). *Government Information Quarterly*, 29(3), 346–360.
- Panopoulou, E., Tambouris, E., & Tarabanis, K. (2014). Success factors in designing eParticipation initiatives. *Information and Organization*, 24(4), 195–213. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infoandorg.2014.08.001>
- Peristeras, V., Mentzas, G., Tarabanis, K. A., & Abecker, A. (2009). Transforming E-government and E-participation through IT. *IEEE Intelligent Systems*, 24(5), 14–19. *IEEE Intelligent Systems*. <https://doi.org/10.1109/MIS.2009.103>
- Sgueo, G. (2020). 'Regulatory Gaming' – A Look Into the European Union's Attempts to Engage Citizens With Playful Design (SSRN Scholarly Paper 3518068). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3518068>
- Stratulat, C., Butcher, P. (2018). The European Citizens' Consultations – Evaluation report. European Policy Centre. <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/The-European-Citizens-Consult~267d84>
- Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU. (2022). Non-paper by Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and Sweden on the outcome of and follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe <https://t.co/YMRd6SKcJI> [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/sweden2023eu/status/1523637827686531072/photo/1>
- Von der Leyen, U. (2022). State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen [Text]. European Commission – European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_5493

- Wirtz, B. W., Daiser, P., & Binkowska, B. (2018). E-participation: A Strategic Framework. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 41(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2016.1242620>
- Wolff, G. B., Fossum, J. E., Fabbrini, S., Góra, M. (2021). The Conference on the Future of Europe: Vehicle for reform versus forum for reflection? Bruegel | The Brussels-Based Economic Think Tank. <https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/conference-future-europe-vehicle-reform-versus-forum-reflection>
- Zheng, Y. (2017). Explaining citizens' E-participation usage: Functionality of E-participation applications. *Administration & Society*, 49(3), 423–442.

The First European Parliament Elections in Romania (2007)

*Marcela SĂLĂGEAN**,
*Marius MUREȘAN***

Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) is the institution that politically represents the peoples of the states united in the European Union (EU) and deliberates within political groups that bring together representatives from various states. Through its transnational deliberations, it differs from the Parliamentary Assemblies of other international organizations, which deliberate in national groups (Pop, 2007, p. 19). Since 1979, members of the European Parliament have been directly elected through universal suffrage. However, there has been no procedural uniformity among member states in the election of national representatives to the European legislature. The legal framework regarding participation in EP elections has

* Dr. Marcela Sălăgean is a Professor at the Department of International Studies and Contemporary History of the Faculty of History and Philosophy (Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca).

** Dr. Marius Mureșan is an Assistant at the Department of International Studies and Contemporary History of the Faculty of History and Philosophy (Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca).

been modified several times since 1979. Most EU states apply a proportional representation system, but each member state has the right to choose whether to use an open-list or closed-list system. In the first case, voters can select one or more candidates, while in the second system, political parties rank candidates on lists according to their own criteria. The term of office for European Parliament members is five years, and membership in the EP is incompatible with national ministerial positions as well as political or administrative roles within EU institutions (Alexandrescu, 2010, p. 169).

The signing of the Accession Treaty in Luxembourg (April 25, 2005) and Romania's subsequent accession to the EU (January 1, 2007) modified, among other things, the legislative framework related to electoral matters. Thus, Romania, as a full-fledged member state of the EU, participates in the composition and organization of all community bodies. The prospect of integration into European structures required, in addition to numerous regulations aimed at aligning with the community level, a constitutional adjustment of electoral issues. Consequently, under the conditions of Romania's EU accession, Romanian citizens have the right to vote and to be elected to the EP in accordance with Article 38 of the Romanian Constitution (Romanian Constitution, 2003).

Romanian Observers in the European Parliament

In Romania, according to the Accession Treaty, the first elections for the European Parliament were supposed to be organized no later than December 31, 2007. However, before Romania could designate its first representatives to the EP through national elections

following the signing of the Accession Treaty, the President of the European Parliament, Josep Borrell, extended an invitation to both Romania and Bulgaria, which were set to become EU member states on January 1, 2007, to appoint observers for the European legislature, whose mandate would begin in September 2005. According to the European Parliament's rules of procedure, observers had the opportunity to affiliate with existing political groups and participate in their activities. They could attend plenary sessions of the European Parliament but were not allowed to speak, vote, or run in internal elections. This applied to committees and delegations, where they could only intervene if invited to speak by the chair (Chamber of Deputies, 2006).

Romania was allocated 35 seats, and the political algorithm used to determine mandates in the Romanian Parliament allocated the following distribution: the Social Democratic Party (PSD) – 12 representatives/observers, the National Liberal Party (PNL) – 7, the Democratic Party (PD) – 5, the Greater Romania Party (PRM) – 5, the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) – 3, the Conservative Party (PC) – 2, and minorities other than the Hungarian minority – 1. In a joint session of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate on June 27, 2005, the list of Romanian parliamentarians appointed as observers to the EP was voted on.

An investigation conducted by the *România Liberă* (en. *Free Romania*) newspaper sought to highlight the expectations politicians had for Romania's first representatives in the EP and to outline the profile of the ideal candidate through political actors' statements. Radu Berceanu, Vice President of the PD, stated that the observers designated by his party would also be the candidates in the upcoming elections, and they were expected to know

at least two foreign languages, refrain from active domestic politics, and have political experience. He added, "If it's a 24-year-old kid, they might not realize they are an MEP and be sent for coffee."

Table 1.

Names of Members of the Romanian Parliament Appointed as Observers

Political Party	Names of Representatives/Observers
Social Democratic Party (PSD) – Chamber of Deputies/ Senate	Titus Corlăţean, Gabriela Creţu, Cristian-Sorin Dumitrescu, Ioan Mircea Paşcu, Radu Podgorean, Daciana Octavia Sârbu, Adrian Severin, Sorin Dan Mihalache. Senators: Alexandru Athanasiu, Corina Creţu, Vasile Dâncu, Silvia Adriana Țicău
National Liberal Party (PNL) – Chamber of Deputies	Tiberiu Bărbuleţiu, Dumitru Gheorghe, Mircea Coşea, Adina Ioana Vălean, Ovidiu Ioan Silaghi
Democratic Party (PD) – Chamber of Deputies	Roberta Alma Anastase, Marian-Jean Marinescu, Monica Maria Iacob Ridzi
PNL-PD Justice and Truth Alliance (DA) – Senate	Ioan Alexandru Morţun, Adrian Mihai Cioroianu, Maria Petre, Nicolae-Vlad Popa, Radu Țârle
Greater Romania Party (PRM) – Chamber of Deputies	Daniela Buruiană Aprodu, Vlad Gabriel Hoge, Petre Popeangă, Viorel Senior Duca
Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) – Chamber of Deputies / Senate	Kelemen Atilla Bela Ladislau, Konya-Hamar Sandor. Senator: Szabo Karoly Ferenc
Conservative Party (PC) – Chamber of Deputies / Senate	Dumitru Becşeneanu; Senator: Silvia Ciornei
National Minorities (except Hungarian minority) – Chamber of Deputies	Ovidiu Victor Ganţ

Source: (Parliament of Romania, 2005)

From the PSD, Viorel Hrebenciuc believed that observers should have experience with the EP, while Cristian Diaconescu stressed

the need to appoint observers based on professional criteria, not just political ones, a topic discussed in the EP after the previous enlargement wave. Corneliu Ciontu, the president of PRM, stated that his party would nominate "good professionals, knowledgeable about Romanian society's issues, and charismatic" (Ristache, 2005).

Establishing the Legal Framework for Organizing the Elections and Appointing Romania's First MEPS

Preparations for organizing the first elections to designate representatives to the European Parliament took place in a positive atmosphere, as Romania was the most Euro-optimistic country among the Member States, with over 60% national support (HotNews.ro, January 8, 2007). Euro-optimism was particularly evident in the discourse of Romanian politicians (in both national and European policy matters) and had been present several years before 2007, as well as in public opinion. However, as seen in 2007, Euro-optimism was not enough to generate sufficient interest among Romanians to ensure a satisfactory turnout in the first European Parliament elections, an issue we will return to later in this text.

Regarding the procedure for organizing and conducting the elections for the European Parliament, two main proposals were in contention: one from the Government of Romania and one from the Opposition. The Opposition's proposal was put forward by Vasile Pușcaș, who, between December 2000 and December 2004, led Romania's National Negotiation Delegation for EU Accession. Understanding the European dimension of the elections for the European Parliament, the former chief negotiator with the EU

initiated efforts to reform and modernize Romania's electoral process. The proposed system adopted the voting method used in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, and the Netherlands, namely proportional representation with preferential voting. Under this system, parties that held at least one group in the national parliament could participate in the elections for the European Parliament, ensuring a dual legitimacy for elected representatives. It was proposed that electoral districts be structured based on development regions, following the European Union's recommendation that states with more than 20 million inhabitants should organize multiple constituencies. Based on the number of resident voters, each constituency would be allocated a certain number of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from the 35 seats Romania was entitled to. The Romanian Parliament rejected this initiative, and the elections were conducted using the classic closed-list voting system (Alexandrescu, 2010, pp. 169–170).

On December 20, 2006, the plenary session of the Chamber of Deputies adopted the legislative proposal regarding the organization and conduct of the elections for the European Parliament. On January 16, 2007, the President of Romania, Traian Băsescu, signed the decree promulgating Law No. 33/2007 on the organization and conduct of the elections for the European Parliament (Plugaru & Cristea, 2014).

The law consisted of four chapters, comprising 76 articles. According to the general provisions in Chapter I, the territory of Romania became a single national constituency, the mandate of Romanian members in the European Parliament was set at five years, and they were to be elected "by universal, equal, direct, secret, and freely expressed vote," either through a list voting system,

where the principle of proportional representation applied or through independent candidacies. The act introduced new terminology for the Romanian electoral system, such as "community voter" and "resident voter," designed to ensure the voting rights of citizens of EU Member States residing in Romania and of Romanian citizens residing in Romania or abroad who were entitled to elect Romanian representatives to the European forum. Voting rights were granted to Romanian citizens aged 18 and over, while the right to run as a candidate was extended to voting citizens who had reached the age of 23. Ineligible categories included individuals in the following positions: "judges of the Constitutional Court, the ombudsman, magistrates, active military personnel, police officers, and other categories of public officials, including those with special status, as established by organic law." The Central Electoral Bureau played an important role during both the pre-electoral period and in ensuring the smooth running of the campaign and the voting process. Candidature proposals had to be submitted and registered with the Central Electoral Bureau, which was specially established to organize and conduct the specific electoral operations, no later than 60 days before the reference date (Parliament of Romania, 2007). This date had to be set by a Government decision within the period indicated by the Council of the European Union, i.e., by December 31, 2007.

Chapter 2, titled "Exercising the Right to Vote and Be Elected as a Member from Romania in the European Parliament," stipulated that access to the European legislative body required 200,000 signatures for each party to register candidates, while independent candidates needed the support of 100,000 voters. The order of candidates on the ballots was determined by a random draw conducted

by the president of the Central Electoral Bureau. The functioning of this body and the smooth conduct of the electoral process were ensured through the organization of county electoral bureaus, the electoral bureau for polling stations abroad, the electoral bureaus of Bucharest's sectors, and the electoral bureaus of polling stations.

Chapter 3 sets out the conditions for organizing and conducting the elections, the composition and main duties of the Central Electoral Bureau, as well as the functioning of electoral bureaus at the local level. The law provided for a 30-day election campaign period and specific rules regarding access to mass media. For example, parties already represented in the European Parliament were given an advantage, as they were allocated 4/5 of airtime, while 1/5 was reserved for parties without MEPs and independent candidates. Finally, an electoral threshold of 5% of the total national vote was established for parties and party alliances. At the same time, independent candidates had to obtain a number of votes at least equal to the national electoral coefficient. This was calculated by dividing the total number of votes cast by the number of seats allocated to Romania in the European Parliament.

In Chapter 4, "Transitional and Final Provisions," the powers of the Permanent Electoral Authority, as applied to national elections, were extended to the vote for the European Parliament. Additionally, the Government was responsible for setting the electoral calendar, as well as the budget and expenses required for the electoral process. Although the regular terms for MEPs were set at five years, the terms of those elected by Romanian citizens in 2007 were limited in duration, as Article 74 provided for the termination of their terms at the end of the 2004–2009 European Parliament legislative term.

Since the elections were not held before January 1, 2007, Romania's first MEPs were appointed by the Romanian Parliament, with their term beginning on the date of Romania's accession to the EU. The list was voted on in a joint session of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate on November 23, 2006 (Parliament of Romania, 2006). Upon analysing the list, we observe only three changes compared to the composition of the observer delegation to the European Parliament. While the PSD, UDMR, PD, and national minorities maintained their nominations, each of the other parties – PNL, PC, and PRM – made one replacement for political reasons. Vlad Hogeia from PRM and Dumitru Bocșeneanu from PC were replaced because they resigned from their parties, being substituted by Cristian Stănescu and Eduard Helvig, respectively (Pîrvu, 2006).

The exclusion of Senator Nicolae Vlad Popa from the PNL lists was due to a split within the party, which impacted subsequent election cycles. This was related to events involving the PNL, the party of Prime Minister Călin Popescu Țăriceanu. Following his criticism of the party leadership, Theodor Stolojan, former Prime Minister of Romania, was expelled from the PNL, alleging a decision made by the party leadership with the direct involvement of the sitting prime minister. Țăriceanu was accused of not being interested in reforming the party but rather in preserving a status quo where personal interests took precedence over those of party members. Stolojan was the fourth prominent member of the PNL to be expelled in 2006, after Mona Muscă, Cristian Boureanu, and Raluca Turcan, all considered close to President Traian Băsescu (Mihai, 2006).

In these circumstances, Theodor Stolojan and Valeriu Stoica announced the creation of a new centre-right platform, a "federative"

formation intended to include the PNL, PD, and PNȚCD. One of those who joined the new "liberal platform" was the liberal senator Nicolae Vlad Popa, although he did not resign from the party. As a result of this decision, the PNL replaced him as an MEP with Senator Gheorghe Vergil Șerbu. After his replacement, the senator accused the leadership of the PNL of abuse and criticized, in turn, the party leadership: "That is why they fired Stolojan and Stoica because they are afraid of an alternative to the party leadership" (Adevărul.ro, 2006).

The Political Crisis of 2007: Postponement of the European Parliament Elections

The initial date set for the elections was May 13, 2007. After the candidates were nominated, it was expected that the authorities would focus on ensuring the proper organization of everything that the first European Parliament elections entailed. However, this did not happen due to the disagreements within the Romanian political class, which had been manifesting for some time.

The history of European Parliament elections in Romania began with a postponement. Initially, the elections were supposed to be held immediately after accession in the spring of 2007. However, due to an internal political conflict that led to the suspension of the President of Romania and the exclusion of the Democratic Party (PD) from the government, the elections were postponed to late November. Thus, Romania's first European election was entirely marked by this internal conflict (Suciu, 2011, pp. 215–216).

March 12, 2007, can be recorded as the day the decision was made to postpone the first European elections, although discussions

about such a measure had already been circulating in the public sphere and reflected in the Romanian media. To help readers understand the atmosphere and context in which these events took place, we will provide two illustrative examples.

According to the newspaper *Romania Libera* on March 10, 2007, Adriean Videanu, the executive president of the Democratic Party (PD), stated that Prime Minister Tăriceanu must fully assume the decision to postpone the European Parliament elections, which the Democrats would not support, as there were no political reasons for such a decision. "We are surprised that the prime minister, once again, without consulting the governing partners, has changed his mind," stated Videanu, who also emphasized that PD did not support the prime minister and that there were not enough reasons for postponing the European elections. He also underlined that Romania risked falling behind Bulgaria, which had decided to hold its elections on May 20 (Iamandi, 2007).

In contrast to the PD leader, Mircea Geoană, president of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), stated that the prime minister's decision to request the postponement of the European elections was rational and that, at that moment, the priority was to resolve the governmental and constitutional crisis Romania was facing. "It is a rational decision. From now on, we all need to focus on more quickly resolving the crisis," said Geoană right after the prime minister's statement. Geoană maintained that the postponement of the elections was not a PSD desire and that the prime minister's argument that the social democrats had not abandoned their effort to suspend the president was unfounded. At the same time, Geoană suggested that March should be dedicated to resolving the governmental and constitutional crisis, not election preparations. He

also highlighted that a stable government was necessary for the benefit of the citizens. Geoană further argued that postponing the elections would clarify internal matters and that, had the original date been kept, Romania risked making internal issues like corruption allegations between the president and prime minister campaign topics for the European elections. Moreover, Romania would have sent a clear signal of instability if it held the campaign during a time when the president was on the verge of being suspended, and the prime minister risked facing a similar fate due to an ongoing investigation, Geoană added. In conclusion, Geoană suggested that October would be a more appropriate month for the elections (Iamandi, 2007).

UDMR president Markó Béla was also unhappy about the possibility of postponing the elections. He stated that the potential delay of the elections was unappealing to him and that he would discuss the Union's stance with its ministers at the extraordinary government meeting. PRM senator Gheorghe Funar suggested that the European elections would most likely be rescheduled for October 14. "This is a request that was presented to the prime minister last week, supported by the PSD and PC, and from what I know, the Liberals also want the elections to take place in the fall," Funar said (Iamandi, 2007).

PC senator Codruț Șereș declared that Prime Minister Tăriceanu made a "wise decision" by proposing the postponement of the European Parliament elections, as they could not be organized in May given that the public agenda contained "entirely different topics, unrelated to the European Parliament elections." Șereș reminded that the PC had called for the postponement of the European elections since the topic was first raised for public debate, with the

Conservatives citing Romania's unfavourable political context for holding European elections. In Șereș's opinion, the prime minister's decision to postpone the European elections would not change the relationship between the PNL and PD within the DA Alliance. "As we have come to expect, the PD will complain and express indignation, but I do not believe they will leave the government," he said. "We invite the PD if they are dissatisfied with this decision by the prime minister, to clearly express their displeasure and leave the government if they are so troubled by the prime minister's stance," Șereș added. The PC senator also suggested that it was possible that the president would express disagreement with the election postponement but noted that "unfortunately for Traian Băsescu, this decision belongs solely to the prime minister, and any contradictory opinion on this matter only serves to disrupt the public agenda further and demonstrate the ongoing power struggle between the two Palaces," Șereș pointed out. PD vice-president Ioan Oltean considered the prime minister's decision to postpone the date of the European elections to be a "frivolous," "demagogic" political gesture that "played into the hands of the PSD" and was motivated by the prime minister's fear of the consequences of his own policies. He also emphasized that this was a unilateral decision by Tăriceanu, implying a unilateral responsibility on the part of the prime minister. Oltean added that the PD was not consulted and would not participate in the implementation of this measure (Iamandi, 2007).

In *Libertatea* (en. Freedom) on March 11, 2007, under the title "Election Postponement Blows Up the Alliance," Petre Dobrescu noted that Prime Minister Călin Popescu Tăriceanu's announcement to postpone the European elections had completely displeased PD representatives. In that context, readers of Dobrescu's article learned

that PD leader Emil Boc had called an Alliance meeting that same morning to try to stop the prime minister's plan. Additionally, President Băsescu announced his participation in the Executive's meeting, sending a letter to Prime Minister Tăriceanu. Dobrescu concluded that postponing the European elections could result in the PD leaving the government, as Tăriceanu had challenged the Democrats to either stand in solidarity with the government or, failing that, join the opposition. The article also included the perspective of PC deputy secretary general Codrin Ștefănescu, who, on March 10, called for the PD to exit the government. "It is very important to see what will happen after the government meeting, whether the Democratic Party will leave the government, or it is possible that the Democratic Party may be rejected from the government," Ștefănescu said (Dobrescu, 2007).

The next day, on March 12, 2007, Prime Minister Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu announced that, during the government meeting held that day, he would propose the postponement of the European elections, initially scheduled for May 13. The prime minister justified his decision by noting that his appeal for a European electoral campaign aligned with the real agenda of Romanians had been ignored. On the same day, the government decided, through an Emergency Ordinance, to postpone the European Parliament elections to the second half of 2007. The ordinance specified that the process for electing Romania's members to the European Parliament in 2007 must be conducted under optimal conditions, which were not met at that time. It was not until August 22, 2007, that the government set a date for the elections to select Romania's representatives in the European Parliament for November 25, 2007 (Plugaru & Cristea, 2014).

After the prime minister announced his decision to postpone the elections, President Traian Băsescu, during a press conference held at Cotroceni Palace (*Hotnews*, May 13, 2007), referred to the government's decision as a mistake with two main consequences. On the one hand, externally, Romania failed its first test as a full member of the European Union, as the failure to organize elections meant that the country's representatives in the European Parliament lacked the legitimacy conferred by a popular vote. On the other hand, internally, Băsescu identified a multilayered crisis, with disputes between parties and institutions, opaque agreements between government and opposition representatives, and the willingness of those in power to make compromises in relation to democracy—all revealing the political class's refusal to reform. The president also responded to the two arguments used by Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu, pointing out that he had expressed his willingness to postpone the referendum on uninominal voting, while the president's suspension was part of the democratic process and could not be prohibited. Băsescu concluded that the government's decision was "an act of political mystification," which ambivalently sought to maintain a politician in office by violating the rules of democracy while justifying these decisions by the need to respect European obligations (BBC-Romanian, 2007).

Romanian news sites and press agencies could not remain indifferent to the announcement of the postponement of the European elections. For example, on March 12, 2007, *HotNews* published several articles, one of which, titled "European Elections Postponed by Decision Assumed by Prime Minister Călin Popescu Tăriceanu," authored by B. Blagu, described the events as follows:

"The government adopted the Emergency Ordinance postponing the organization of the European Parliament elections, a decision assumed by the prime minister, despite continued opposition from PD ministers. The decision was made after the departure of President Traian Băsescu. Călin Popescu Tăriceanu stated, after the president left that the meeting attended by Băsescu was not actually a government meeting. However, sources from Victoria Palace claimed that when the president entered the room, the ministers were aware of the agenda for the government meeting. According to the same sources, the prime minister did not utter a word for the entire hour during which Traian Băsescu was present. President Traian Băsescu arrived at Victoria Palace shortly after 11:00 and left after an hour. Inside the building, shortly before 11:00, were also party leaders Emil Boc and Adrieau Videanu, who discussed the idea of postponing the European elections with Deputy Prime Minister Markó Béla, UDMR president. According to sources close to the deputy prime minister, he agreed to support the Democrats' position of avoiding the postponement of the elections. Traian Băsescu's arrival at Victoria Palace occurred after the prime minister sent him a letter stating that his presence was constitutionally unjustified. During the hour Băsescu was present, only cabinet members were in the room, with no advisors or secretaries of state, as is customary during a government meeting. After the president's arguments in favour of holding the elections on May 13, the ministers presented their opinions in line with the positions of their parties. Thus, the Liberals supported the prime minister's position, while the Democrats backed the president. Markó Béla stated that he supported the idea of holding the elections on May 13 but did not consider the current political climate suitable for such an event." (Blagu, 2007)

The article continued by noting that under the provisions of the Law on the Functioning of the Government of Romania and Ministries, the government adopts ordinances and decisions by consensus. In the absence of consensus, decisions are made by the

prime minister. In this case, Blagu wrote that, given the opposition from PD ministers and the abstention from UDMR, Călin Popescu Tăriceanu had to assume responsibility for the decision. Consequently, the text of the Government Ordinance emphasized that given the inappropriate internal political climate and the importance of the event, measures were required, namely the postponement of the European Parliament elections to the second half of the year. The ordinance also provided that the elections would take place on a date to be set after consultations with political parties (Blagu, 2007).

The Western media also covered the postponement of Romania's first European Parliament elections. On March 12, 2007, at the German radio station *Deutsche Welle*, Horațiu Pepine stated that the election postponement had been announced by the prime minister a few days earlier, but still, President Traian Băsescu tried to convince the head of the government to hold the elections on the initially scheduled date of May 13, and announced his presence at the Cabinet meeting, which represented an unresolved authority conflict. The statement continued by noting that the prime minister contested the president's right to attend a government meeting on the topic of the European elections and consequently refused to acknowledge that the first part of the cabinet meeting, during which Traian Băsescu was present, could be considered a government meeting (Pepine, 2007).

The article, titled "The President Leaves, the Prime Minister Issues the Ordinance," at *Deutsche Welle* noted that it was only after the president's departure that Călin Popescu Tăriceanu took out the text of an Emergency Ordinance postponing the elections to a date to be set later through consultations with political parties. It added that the prime minister sent the text of the document to the

cabinet members but avoided an actual debate, as a debate had taken place right before the government meeting, during an extraordinary session of the DA Alliance Coordination Council, where the leaderships of the PNL and PD met. During the extraordinary meeting, the PD unsuccessfully tried to convince the Liberals to abandon their project, and the president failed in this attempt (Pepine, 2007).

Of particular interest, in terms of evoking the mood of Romania's political class in March 2007, is the second part of the *Deutsche Welle* report. It highlighted the fact that the prime minister enjoyed broad support from the opposition, with the PSD and PC providing the most backing. Toward the end of the analysis, *Deutsche Welle* also brought up a few other positions opposing the prime minister's decision, such as that of Valeriu Stoica, who explained that, from a legal standpoint, the prime minister's assumption of the postponement of the European Parliament elections was unconstitutional, as the elections could not be rescheduled once the formation of the Central Electoral Bureau had triggered the electoral mechanism. However, the most illustrative aspect highlighted by *Deutsche Welle* came at the end when it was noted that there was also a conflict during the government meeting when Vasile Blaga, the Interior Minister and vice-president of the PD, refused to countersign the ordinance postponing the elections. As a result, the prime minister allegedly threatened him with dismissal. It was further reported by *Deutsche Welle* that immediately after the Victoria Palace meeting, the PD leadership, along with all party ministers, held an extraordinary meeting (Pepine, 2007).

The Romanian press also reported on the extraordinary meeting held by the PD after the government session. This took place at the party's headquarters on Aleea Modrojan, where both PD

ministers and party leaders, including president Emil Boc and executive president Adriean Videanu, were present. One by one, Vasile Blaga, Monica Macovei, Sulfina Barbu, Gheorghe Barbu, Sorin Frunzăverde, Anca Boagiu, as well as Mayor Liviu Negoită, MP Ioan Oltean, and Secretary of State Mircea Toader arrived at the PD headquarters. PD leaders discussed the prime minister's decision to postpone the European Parliament elections and opted against the postponement. It was decided that PD ministers would not sign any draft legislation aimed at postponing the European elections, according to Emil Boc, following the PD leadership's extraordinary meeting. According to the PD leader, at the Alliance's headquarters, PD representatives proposed to Prime Minister Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu that the Alliance reject in Parliament the proposal to suspend President Traian Băsescu while maintaining the May 13 date for the European elections and in parallel, the president would postpone the referendum on uninominal voting until that date. Referring to the prime minister's decision to postpone the European elections, the PD president deemed it a unilateral act, serving the PSD and distancing the prime minister from the Alliance and the coalition. The Democrats also criticized the prime minister and the Alliance partners for making the decision to postpone the elections without prior consultation with the DA Alliance partners (Ziare.com, March 12, 2007).

The postponement of the European elections was not only reported in the Romanian media on March 12, 2007 but also in the following days, with the press filled with articles on the subject. However, these analyses were primarily carried out from the perspective of their impact on domestic politics, which is why they were not included in the current analysis.

The 2007 European Parliament Elections

Initially postponed, Romania's first European elections took place on November 25, 2007. The final results showed that the Democratic Party (PD) won 28.81% of the votes, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) – 23.11%, the National Liberal Party (PNL) – 13.44%, the Liberal Democratic Party (PLD) – 7.78%, and the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) – 5.52% (Euractiv, 2007). The elections saw a low voter turnout of 29.47%. This participation rate was low even compared to other Member States that held elections in 2004, although it surpassed some of the countries from the most recent wave of accession, such as Slovakia (16.97%), Poland (20.87%), Estonia (26.83%), and the Czech Republic (28.3%) (Alexandrescu, 2010, p. 179). The significant difference between attitudes toward the EU and, specifically, toward the European Parliament and the election in which Romanians elected their representatives to the EP can be explained by multiple factors, both related to the European political context and internal factors (Suciu, 2011, pp. 205–206).

Referring to Romanian voters' participation in the 2007 European Parliament elections, Adrian Cioroianu noted in a study published in the journal *Sfera Politicii* (en. Political Sphere) that "in Romania's case, the low turnout also has a positive aspect. At least we have the chance to let go of one of the great self-deceptive fantasies of post-communist Romania: our apparent enthusiasm for joining the EU, for re-entering the European family, etc. All of these are nice phrases and sounded good, but that does not mean they are reflected in reality." Cioroianu further explained that the truth is that Eurosceptics exist in Romania (as they do in all European

states), but in Romania, they were hidden behind a veil of false pro-European enthusiasm (Cioroianu, 2009). Regarding Romania's first European elections, in an interview conducted on November 26, 2007, by Victor Iulian Tucă, exclusively for *Deutsche Welle*, with a German MP from the European People's Party (EPP), the German politician was asked about the relatively low voter turnout in Romania. He responded:

"Unfortunately, it is a 'normal' result that we see when it comes to European elections. In 2004, we recorded the lowest percentage, and in this sense, Romania is quickly becoming a 'normal' Member State. President Băsescu's hope of increasing turnout in the European elections by organizing a referendum at the same time failed. In any case, on average, the percentage for European elections is 40–45%. People do not see the importance of European elections. Romania has also obtained EU membership, so the main goal has been achieved. The election was viewed more from the perspective of national elections rather than a European ballot. Therefore, there was no effective communication from politicians to convince citizens to vote" (Tucă, 2007).

Comparing with the list of Romanian Euro-observers, we find (in Table 2) that few of them were elected in the European Parliament elections: Roberta-Alma Anastase, Monica Iacob Ridzi, Marian Jean Marinescu, Maria Petre, Nicolae Vlad Popa, Corina Crețu, Silvia Adriana Țicău, Titus Corlățean, Gabriela Crețu, Ioan Mircea Pașcu, Daciana Sârbu, Adrian Severin. This situation is due to a variety of factors, including the weak performance of some political parties, the distribution of mandates after the elections, personal reasons, and, notably, the lack of promotion of certain candidates by their parties. Another noteworthy aspect is the insufficient promotion of those who were active as observers in Brussels.

**Table 2. Romanian Members
of the European Parliament Elected in the November 2007 Elections**

Political Party	Members of the European Parliament
PD (13 representatives)	Sorin Frunzăverde, Roberta Anastase, Petru Filip, Monica Iacob Ridzi, Marian Jean Marinescu, Maria Petre, Rareș Niculescu, Marian Zlotea, Dragoș David, Mihaela Popa, Constantin Dumitriu, Nicodim Bulzesc, Sebastian Bodu
PSD (10 representatives)	Titus Corlățean, Adrian Severin, Rovana Plumb, Daciana Sârbu, Cătălin Nechifor, Silvia Adriana Țicău, Ioan Mircea Pașcu, Gabriela Crețu, Corina Crețu, Victor Boștinaru
PNL (6 representatives)	Renate Weber, Daniel Dăianu, Adina Vălean, Cristian Bușoi, Ramona Mănescu, Magor Imre Csibi
Liberal Democratic Party (PLD) (3 representatives)	Theodor Stolojan, Dumitru Oprea, Nicolae Vlad Popa
UDMR (2 representatives)	Frunđa György, Sógor Csaba
1 independent	Tőkés László

This reason is highlighted in a report by the Institute for Public Policies (2007). According to the report, the candidate lists did not promote the most active observers. The report examined the activities of 19 Euro-observers who were candidates for a mandate in the November 25, 2007 elections. Those with above-average activity included Adrian Severin, Gabriela Crețu, Roberta Anastase, Marian Jean Marinescu, Maria Petre, Silvia Cioarei, Adina Vălean, and Silvia Adriana Țicău. Some of them demonstrated their interest in the topics debated in the European Parliament. They continued to do so as MEPs through numerous interventions (either in plenary or in committees), submitted amendments, opinions, or questions, with Silvia Adriana Țicău, Marian Jean Marinescu, and Gabriela Crețu being among the most active. While this group of Euro-observers

showed above-average activity, on the opposite end, with below-average activity, were Rovana Plumb, Daciana Sârbu, Monica Iacob Ridzi, and Silviu Buşoi (Euractiv, November 19, 2007). These names also appeared on the final list of elected MEPs. Some of these individuals' activity increased during their time as MEPs.

The distribution of mandates and membership in European political groups occurred as follows: The Democratic Liberal Party (PD-L) and UDMR in the European People's Party (EPP) – 18; PNL in the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) – 6; PSD in the Party of European Socialists (PES) – 10, and one unaffiliated. Following this distribution of mandates in the EP, Romania's national delegation was fully and legitimately elected. Unfortunately, for Romania's image following the appointment of its first MEPs, internal national disagreements were transferred to the community level, leading the President of the European Parliament to decide that none of the 35 new deputies would deliver the opening speech on behalf of the national delegation.

Assigned to the 20 committees of the European Parliament, the newly elected MEPs began their actual work, but not all retained their mandates. In the June 2008 elections, many MEPs decided to run, after less than five months, in the local elections. The most unstable group in this regard was the PD-L (7 MEPs), followed by the PSD (2 MEPs). This dynamic could be interpreted as a sign that the nine MEPs viewed the European Parliament as a stepping stone for (re)launching their national political careers. The same situation occurred in subsequent years/mandates when other MEPs decided to run for the Romanian Parliament, abandoning their seats in the European Parliament (Alexandrescu, 2010, pp. 180–181). Another possible reason could be found in the Romanian electoral calendar

of that period. After the 2004 parliamentary and presidential elections, the 2007 European elections were the first in a series of five elections held within approximately two years. Their objective may have been to test or even change the electoral weight of the parties in preparation for the local and parliamentary elections of 2008 (Suciu, 2011, pp. 215–216).

References

- Adevărul.ro. (2006). Senatorul N.V. Popa trece la platformiști. [Senator N.V. Popa Joins the Platformists.] În *Adevărul*, 4 decembrie 2006, <https://adevarul.ro/politica/senatorul-nv-popa-trece-la-platformisti-768875.html>. (December 2023).
- Alexandrescu, M. (2010). Comportamentul reprezentanților din România în Parlamentul European. [The Behaviour of Romania's Representatives in the European Parliament] În Gherghina S. (editor). *Cine Decide? Partide, reprezentanți și politici în Parlamentul României și cel European*, Iași, Institutul European.
- BBC-Romanian (2007). Guvernul amână alegerile pentru Parlamentul European. [The Government Postpones the European Parliament Elections]. În *BBC-Romanian*, 12 Martie. https://www.bbc.co.uk/romanian/news/story/2007/03/070312_alegeri_pe_amanate.shtml. (January 2024).
- Blagu, B. (2007). Alegerile europarlamentare, amânate prin decizie asumată de premierul Călin Popescu Tăriceanu. [The European Parliament Elections Postponed by Decision Taken by Prime Minister Călin Popescu Tăriceanu.] *HotNews*. 12 Martie. <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1107477-alegerile-europarlamentare-amanate-prin-decizie-asumata-premierul-calin-popescu-tariceanu.htm>. (December 2023).
- Deputies Chamber. (2006). *Parlamentarii români desemnați ca observatori la Parlamentul European septembrie 2005 – decembrie 2006*. [Romanian Parliamentarians Appointed as Observers to the European Parliament (September 2005 – December 2006)] Camera Deputaților. <https://www.cdep.ro/pls/parlam/structura2015.dp?idg=1&leg=2004>. (December 2023).

- Cioroianu, A. (2009), *Și totuși, Europa unită există – deși nu toți europenii votează.* [And yet, a united Europe exists – even though not all Europeans vote.] În *Sfera Politicii*, nr. 136/2009, <https://revistasferapoliticii.ro/sfera/136/art02-cioroianu.html> – accesat Decembrie 2023
- Constituția României.* (2003). Publicată în Monitorul Oficial, partea I, nr. 767/31.10.2003. (January 2024).
- Dobrescu, P. (2007). Amânarea alegerilor aruncă în aer Alianța. [The Postponement of the Elections Blows Up the Alliance]. în *Libertatea*, 11 martie 2007, <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/amanarea-alegerilor-arunca-in-aer-alianța-182314>. (December 2023).
- Euractiv (19 Noiembrie 2007). Listele cu euro-candidații nu îi promovează pe cei mai activi. [The Candidate Lists Do Not Promote the Most Active] *Euractiv*. disponibil la http://www.euractiv.ro/uniunea-europeana/articles|displayArticle/articleID_11887/Listele-cu-euro-candidati-nu-ii-promoveaza-pe-cei-mai-activi.html. (December 2023).
- Euractiv (27 Noiembrie 2007). Rezultate Definitive: PD – 13 mandate, PSD – 10, PNL – 6, PLD – 3. [Final Results: PD – 13 seats, PSD – 10, PNL – 6, PLD – 3]. *Euractiv*. http://www.euractiv.ro/uniunea-europeana/articles|displayArticle/articleID_11948/Rezultate-DEFINITIVE-PD-13-mandate-PSD-10-PNL-6-PLD-3.html. (December 2023).
- HotNews (12 Martie 2007). Băsescu: Am garantat membrilor guvernului că nu voi organiza un referendum până la 13 mai. [Băsescu: I Guaranteed the Government Members That I Would Not Organize a Referendum Before May 13] *HotNews.ro*. <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1107369-basescu-garantat-membrilor-guvernului-nu-voi-organiza-referendum-pana-13-mai.htm>. (January 2024).
- HotNews.ro. (8 Ianuarie 2007). Românii rămân cei mai optimiști europeni. [Romanians Remain the Most Optimistic Europeans] *HotNews.ro*. <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1130851-romanii-raman-cei-mai-optimisti-europeni.htm>. (January 2024).
- Iamandi, C. D. (2007) Reacții la declarația de amânare a euroalegerilor. [Reactions to the Announcement of the Postponement of the European Elections]. *România Liberă*, 10 Martie. <https://romanalibera.ro/sport/reactii-la-declaratia-lui-tariceanu-de-amanare-a-euroalegerilor-89549/>. (December 2023).
- Institutul pentru Politici Publice. (2007). *Activitatea europarlamentarilor candidați la alegerile din 20 Noiembrie 2007.* [Activity of the MEP Candidates in the

- November 20, 2007 Elections] http://www.ipp.ro/documente_postate/publicatii/Activitatea%20europarlamentarilor%20candidati%20la%20alegerile%20din%2025%20noiembrie%202007.pdf. (December 2023).
- Mihai, D. (2006). Stolojan: Am fost exclus din PNL la ordinul lui Tăriceanu. [Stolojan: I Was Expelled from PNL by Tăriceanu's Order]. în *HotNews.ro*, 11 octombrie 2006, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1150533-stolojan-fost-exclus-din-pnl-ordinul-lui-tariceanu.htm>. (December 2023).
- Romanian Parliament. (2005). *Hotărâre nr. 34 din 27 iunie 2005 privind desemnarea unor deputați și senatori în calitate de observatori la Parlamentul European*. [Decision No. 34 of June 27, 2005, Regarding the Appointment of Certain Deputies and Senators as Observers to the European Parliament.] Monitorul Oficial nr. 555 din 29 iunie 2005. <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/62722>. (December 2023).
- Romanian Parliament. (2006). *Dezbaterea și adoptarea Hotărârii Parlamentului României privind desemnarea unor deputați și senatori în calitate de membri ai Parlamentului European*. [Debate and Adoption of the Decision of the Romanian Parliament Regarding the Appointment of Certain Deputies and Senators as Members of the European Parliament]. Sedinta comuna a Camerei Deputatilor si Senatului din 23 noiembrie 2006. Camera Deputaților. <https://www.cdep.ro/pls/steno/steno2015.stenograma?ids=6200&idm=3&idl=1>. (December 2023).
- Romanian Parliament. (2007). *Legea nr. 33/2007 privind organizarea și desfășurarea alegerilor pentru Parlamentul European*. [Law No. 33/2007 on the Organization and Conduct of Elections for the European Parliament]. Monitorul Oficial, Partea I nr. 627 din 31 august 2012. *Consolidarea din data de 16 noiembrie 2018*. (Ziua organizării alegerii membrilor din România în P.E. (Articolul 5, aliniatul 4). [Consolidation from November 16, 2018. (The Day of the Election of Members from Romania to the European Parliament (Article 5, Paragraph 4)]
- Pepine, H. (2007). Premierul a amânat alegerile pentru Parlamentul European. [The Prime Minister Postponed the European Parliament Elections] *Deutsche Welle*. 12 Martie. <https://www.dw.com/ro/premierul-a-amânat-alegerile-pentru-parlamentul-european/a-2632911>. (December 2023).
- Pîrvu, L. (2006). Au fost stabiliți primii europarlamentari români. [The First Romanian Members of the European Parliament Have Been Appointed]. In *HotNews.ro*, 23 noiembrie <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1140795-fost-stabiliti-primii-europarlamentari-romani.htm>, accesat ianuarie 2024.

- Plugaru, H. și Cristea, I. A. (2014). 2014 PE Alegeri europarlamentare 2007. [2014 European Parliament Elections and 2007 European Parliament Elections]. In *Agerpres.ro*, <https://www.agerpres.ro/europarlamentare-2014-documentare/2014/04/25/2014-pe-alegeri-europarlamentare-2007-08-55-03>. (December 2023).
- Pop, L. (2007). *Pentru Parlamentul European*. Oradea, Editura Universității din Oradea.
- Ristache, R. (2005). Portret de euro-observator: lipicios, carismatic, umblat, bun lobby-ist și... să nu se zgâiască! [Portrait of a Euro-Observer: Charismatic, Well-Connected, Skilled Lobbyist, and... Not to Stare!] În *România Liberă*. 23 mai. <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1227044-portret-euro-observator-lipicios-carismatic-umblat-bun-lobby-ist-nu-zgaiasca.htm>. (December 2023).
- Suciu, A. (2011). Inversarea funcțională în relația UE cu România. O perspectivă asupra alegerilor europene din 2007 și 2009. [Functional Reversal in the EU-Romania Relationship: A Perspective on the 2007 and 2009 European Elections]. In. Schifirneț, C. (coord). *Europenizarea societății românești și mass-media*. București, Editura Comunicare.ro.
- Tucă, V. I. (2007). Markus Ferber: PD-ul a câștigat alegerile europene din România. [Markus Ferber: The Democratic Party (PD) Won the European Elections in Romania]. În *Deutsche Welle*. 26 noiembrie 2007, <https://www.dw.com/ro/markus-ferber-pd-ul-a-câștigat-alegerile-europene-din-românia/a-2972818>. (December 2023).
- Ziare.com (2007). Boc: Miniștrii PD nu vor semna Ordonanța de amânare a europarlamentarelor. [Boc: PD Ministers Will Not Sign the Ordinance to Postpone the European Elections]. *Ziare.com*, 12 Martie 2007 <https://ziare.com/emil-boc/guvern/boc-ministrii-pd-nu-vor-semna-ordonanta-de-amanare-a-europarlamentarelor-73322>. (December 2023).

Populism in the 2024 European Parliament elections in Romania. Case study: Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR)

*Ștefan MAROȘAN**

Introduction

In the current Romanian political landscape, populism has become a topic of great interest for both analysts and the public. Populism, based on the opposition between elites perceived as corrupt and the "real people", is a discursive strategy used by various political parties to attract and mobilize the disaffected electorate. In this context, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) and its leader, George Simion, are clear examples of political actors who use this type of discourse.

This study explores how George Simion uses social media, particularly Facebook, to construct and disseminate his political messages. Social networks are now essential tools for political communication, and a leader's ability to frame events and topics

* Ștefan Maroșan is an MA student in the *Leadership and Communication in International Organizations* program - Department of International Studies and Contemporary History of the Faculty of History and Philosophy (Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6203-5757>

of interest in a way that resonates with the public is crucial. Framing theory, which examines how information is presented to influence public perception and behaviour, provides a solid theoretical framework for this research.

The context of this analysis is the elections for the European Parliament on June 9, 2024. In this electoral period, political rhetoric and messages intensify, and social platforms become the main arena for political campaigns. George Simion, the leader of the AUR, actively used Facebook to communicate with his supporters and amplify his political messages.

By applying framing theory to the AUR party's Facebook posts, this study will detail the communication strategies, recurring themes and rhetorical techniques used to mobilize and polarize the audience. The analysis will identify discursive patterns and narrative frames in the AUR leader's posts, exploring how these frames are used to create a dualistic picture of political reality, in which elites are presented as corrupt and disconnected from the needs of the people and the "real people" are portrayed as virtuous and oppressed.

Literature Review

The study of populism in Europe, particularly in the context of the elections for the European Parliament, has increasingly focused on the intersection between populism, Euroscepticism, and authoritarianism. However, some of the existing literature remains too descriptive, often failing to identify the factors fuelling the rise of populism.

Defining Populism: Beyond the Simplistic Framework

The definition of populism by Cas Mudde as a "thin-centred ideology" has been a reference point in political literature, arguing that this phenomenon is explained mainly through a binary opposition between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). However, this definition does not capture the diverse manifestations of populism in different political contexts. In a recent study on the anticipated influence of the far-right in the 2024 European Parliament elections, the same author emphasizes the importance of better understanding how populist ideology interacts with regional politics (Mudde, 2024).

While potentially useful, the attempt to find a minimal definition of populism through characteristics such as a focus on "the people" and anti-elitism risks reducing the phenomenon to a few easily recognizable traits, neglecting the contextual factors that influence populist movements (Rooduijn, 2014).

Other authors, such as Paris Aslanidis, employ a discursive analysis of populism to highlight how populist rhetoric can create political identities and realities (Aslanidis, 2016). This perspective is useful for analysing the 2024 European Parliament elections, where populist narratives may influence electoral behaviour. However, this approach may also be limited if it does not take into account the specific electoral and cultural contexts of each country.

Populism and Democracy

The relationship between populism and democracy is another central point of debate on this topic. Jan-Werner Müller (2016) asserts that populism profoundly undermines liberal democracy by eroding

institutional checks and balances. However, this view can be criticized for portraying populism in an overly negative light. Such an interpretation overlooks past situations in which populism played a corrective role when traditional parties failed to represent certain segments of the electorate adequately.

Kriesi (2014) offers a more balanced interpretation, highlighting that populism can provoke necessary reforms within democratic systems. Nevertheless, such an analysis may underestimate the long-term risks posed by the normalization of populist rhetoric, especially in a context like the European Parliament, where the rise of Eurosceptic populist parties could destabilize the balance between national sovereignty and European integration (Kriesi, 2014). This trend is evident in Central and Eastern Europe, where democratic backsliding has been accompanied by the rise of populist and authoritarian regimes (Alexandrescu & Stoica, 2024).

Hernández and Kriesi's (2016) analysis of the electoral effects of the financial crisis seeks to broaden the understanding of populism's impact on party systems. Although these authors emphasize the importance of economic factors, they overlook the ideological shifts that contributed to populism's rise. This approach needs to be complemented by an analysis of the role of identity politics and cultural reactions, which have had a significant impact in countries such as Hungary and Romania (Hernández & Kriesi, 2016).

Euroscepticism and Populism: A Complicated Relationship

Euroscepticism is a recurring element in the populist discourse within the European Union, but the specialized literature tends to treat this phenomenon as homogeneous. However, Euroscepticism

is no longer confined to marginal parties; it has permeated the discourse of traditional parties, prompting a re-evaluation of the EU's position within national and transnational policies (Stoica, 2023; Brack & Startin, 2015). Pirro, Taggart, and van Kessel (2018) offer a more detailed approach, analysing how various crises have influenced Euroscepticism in different national contexts. For example, in Romania, Euroscepticism is less evident in mainstream political discourse despite public dissatisfaction with EU policies, such as the debate over Romania and Bulgaria's accession to Schengen (Ștefănel et al., 2023).

Oliver Treib notes that Euroscepticism is not just a temporary reaction to European crises but also a response to the centralization of power at the European level. This suggests that pro-integration parties need to rethink their strategy of isolating Eurosceptic parties and, instead, attempt to integrate them into the European decision-making process. In doing so, political tensions could be mitigated, and a constructive dialogue between different political forces in Europe could be facilitated (Treib, 2020). The observation that Euroscepticism is a permanent feature of European politics accurately underscores the deepening of this phenomenon. The 2024 elections tested this permanence, especially as Eurosceptic parties had to adapt to a political landscape that included both traditional Euroscepticism and other forms of populist nationalism.

Populism in Romania: between resistance and acceptance

Romania presents an interesting case for the study of populism and Euroscepticism. While it has experienced significant populist mobilization, it has not followed the same path as Hungary, where

Viktor Orbán has established a strong illiberal regime. Bretter (2022) provides a comparison between Romania and Hungary, arguing that institutional and cultural differences have prevented Romania from developing a similar populist autocracy (Bretter, 2022). The author highlights that Romania's semi-presidential system has created a more fragmented political landscape, preventing the government from being dominated by a single party, as Fidesz did in Hungary after 2010.

Moreover, Romania has not had a charismatic populist leader to unify the political scene, which has hindered the consolidation of a populist regime (see Corbu & Balaban-Bălaș, 2016; Soare & Tufiş, 2018). In Romania, populism combines radical nationalism with communist nostalgia, creating a "populism of contradictions" marked by confused attitudes towards the state, the European Union, the church, and minorities (Stoica, 2018). Unlike Hungary, where Orbán has created a nationalist community and marginalized the opposition, Romania's political culture, characterized by institutional conflicts and frequent government changes, has made it difficult for populist forces to dominate.

Despite these differences, Romania is not immune to the broader regional trends of democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism. There is growing support among the electorate for authoritarian leaders in Romania, fuelled by anti-elitism, economic anxiety, and perceptions of social injustice (Alexandrescu & Stoica, 2024). These factors suggest that while Romania has not yet succumbed to full-fledged populist authoritarianism, the potential for such a development remains, especially in the context of economic and political crises.

The Impact of Digitization and the "Post-Truth" Era on Populism

In recent decades, political communication strategies have changed, mainly through the introduction of the online environment, especially social media, in electoral campaigns. This new reality has led some authors to claim that understanding democracy in the 21st century becomes clearer by explaining how social media and communication technologies are used by political parties to mobilize the electorate (Hassler et al., 2021). In this regard, research has also considered the case of Romania, where, starting in 2016, electoral campaigns have increasingly shifted online (Grad & Marian, 2020; Sasu & Androniciuc, 2017). There is a growing concern in analysing the role of platforms like Facebook in defining and transmitting political identity in debates regarding European integration (Momoc, 2018; Doicar & Crețan, 2021; Maroșan, 2023).

Populist movements have increasingly been influenced by digitalization, and the literature has begun to examine whether this new dimension has an impact on communication with the electorate. For example, Arias Maldonado (2017) highlights how digital platforms have enabled populists to communicate directly with the public, bypassing traditional media. Although his analysis does not specifically focus on the impact on democratic discourse and accountability, it opens the way for an important discussion about the role technology can play in shaping political communication (Arias Maldonado, 2017). In the "post-truth" era, characterized by strong emotional appeals, populists have found a favourable medium in online social platforms to express their messages, and the implications of this trend for European politics remain a subject of interest.

The profile of populist voters does not seem to differ greatly from that of traditional party voters (Dassonneville & McAllister, 2023). The attraction to populism may be more about rhetorical style and ideological positioning than about representing previously unrepresented groups (Dassonneville & McAllister, 2023).

Fear plays an important role in supporting populism, especially in the context of globalization, and digital platforms amplify these fears by creating echo chambers where populist rhetoric can spread uncontrollably (De Vries & Hoffmann, 2016). This phenomenon can also be observed in the context of the 2024 European Parliament elections, when digital platforms promoted sensitive issues from regional and national social, economic, and political agendas, often leading to a certain level of public anxiety and contestation.

The study by Stier, Froio, and Ho (2023) on the impact of exposure to online news on voting behaviour in the 2019 European Parliament elections further illustrates the complex relationship between media consumption and populist support. The authors' findings suggest that exposure to news about EU-related issues influences the support voters give to populist radical right-wing parties, challenging the hypothesis that immigration is the main driver of populist support (Stier et al., 2023).

Populism, Euroscepticism, and the European Parliament: Fragmentation and Contestation

The literature addressing the relationship between populism, Euroscepticism, and the European Parliament has found it characterized by both cooperation and fragmentation. Although Eurosceptic populist parties have gradually gained more ground in the European Parliament since 2009, their ability to influence EU policy is limited

by internal divisions and institutional barriers. In his study, Cas Mudde anticipated further gains for far-right and Eurosceptic parties in the 2024 elections but warned that these gains may not translate into sufficient political influence due to the fragmented nature of the Eurosceptic camp (Mudde, 2024).

Building a coherent Eurosceptic bloc within the European Parliament remains a challenge for populist parties from EU countries that manage to send European deputies after elections. Despite their shared opposition to European integration, these parties struggle to form stable alliances as differences in national interests and ideological positions continue to hinder effective cooperation (Chiru & Wunsch, 2023). This fragmentation persists even after the 2024 elections, limiting Eurosceptic populists' ability to initiate a coherent political movement at the EU level. The European Parliament elections are, in fact, 27 national elections held under different electoral systems and regional political agendas (see Mudde, 2024 and Alexandrescu, 2024).

The rise of Euroscepticism has led to deeper polarization in the European Parliament, and efforts to reach consensus on major EU issues are increasing (Hix et al., 2024). However, the resilience of pro-European forces has been evident, as they have managed to maintain a majority in Parliament.

Integrating regional case studies, such as those from Romania, into broader analyses of populism and authoritarianism can reveal the conditions that favour populist movements. After the 2024 European Parliament elections, it is important to analyse how populist parties have adapted their strategies in response to political and economic changes and how pro-European forces have responded to these challenges. This study represents a first step in

this direction by exploring how a political party in Romania uses online social media platforms to promote its populist and Euro-sceptic electoral agenda.

Research Design

The methodology of this study is designed to analyse the framing strategies used by George Simion, the leader of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), on Facebook during the campaign for the 2024 European Parliament elections. Given the increasingly important role of digital media in political communication, this study focuses on how populist leaders use framing techniques to mobilize supporters, polarize the public, and influence public discourse. The research is grounded in the framing theory developed by Goffman (1974) and Entman (1993), with a particular focus on its application in the communication strategies of populists.

Theoretical Framework

According to Entman (1993), framing involves selecting and highlighting certain aspects of reality within a message, thereby influencing how the issue is defined, how causes are interpreted, how a moral evaluation is made, and how solutions are proposed. Entman explains that framing can be observed at four points in the communication process: with the communicator, in the text, at the receiver, and within the broader culture.

Framing theory is useful for analysing populist discourse, where it is used to create a dichotomy between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004). Populist leaders, such as George Simion, use framing to dramatize crises and present themselves

as the only solution. Additionally, opposition to a political identity for the EU is the primary predictor favouring Euroscepticism in Romania, which the AUR leader uses in his political discourse (Stoica, 2023).

This study is guided by the taxonomy created by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), who described five narrative strategies through which the media and politicians attempt to influence how people interpret events:

- (1) *Responsibility*: attributing responsibility for an event to a specific actor, such as a government or organization.
- (2) *Conflict*: highlighting disputes and tensions between individuals, groups, or nations.
- (3) *Human Interest*: personalizing the news, bringing individual stories and emotions to the forefront to capture public attention.
- (4) *Economic Impact*: emphasizing the financial impact of an event or policy, focusing on costs and benefits.
- (5) *Morality*: interpreting events through the lens of what is considered ethically right or wrong.

This study will analyse how AUR uses these strategies in its social media posts. Additionally, we will examine how populism, digital media, and political communication intersect and how these framing strategies can amplify populist messages and polarize society (Arias Maldonado, 2017).

Populism, seen as a strategy that divides society by criticizing elites and supporting the idea of the "true people," frequently employs these narrative strategies to mobilize supporters. The populist style and discourse influence perceptions of political legitimacy, particularly targeting voters with lower levels of education and those sceptical of the political class (Bos et al., 2012). In times of

crisis, populists often present themselves as saviours, using simple and direct language to offer seemingly straightforward solutions to complex problems. This aims to create an image where the elites are portrayed as the source of all problems and the people as victims (Mickiewicz, 2020).

Framing theory helps us understand how populist leaders manipulate public perceptions and steer political discourse. By selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of reality, leaders like George Simion succeed in attracting supporters and consolidating their position on the political stage, using framing techniques adapted to the political and social context.

Research Design and Methodology

To examine the framing techniques used by George Simion in his Facebook posts, we employed both qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The research is structured around a systematic analysis of the content posted on AUR's official Facebook page during the European Parliament election campaign from May 9, 2024, to June 7, 2024. This period was strategically selected to capture a broader perspective on the campaign's communication strategies, including responses to key political and social events.

Data Collection

The data were manually collected from AUR's official Facebook page, focusing on posts that prominently feature George Simion. The data collection process involved three key steps:

- (1) *Identifying Relevant Posts*: All posts published on AUR's Facebook page during the specified period were reviewed, and those prominently featuring George Simion were selected

for analysis. This selection was based on Simion's prominence in the visual or textual content of the posts.

- (2) *Capturing Content*: The content of each selected post, including text, images, videos, and links, was captured and organized in a database.
- (3) *Collecting Metadata*: Additional metadata, such as the number of likes, shares, and comments, were also recorded to provide context and facilitate quantitative analysis.

Analytical Techniques

To explore the framing strategies used in George Simion's posts, the following techniques were employed:

- (1) *Qualitative Discourse Analysis* to identify recurring themes, rhetorical styles, and linguistic patterns in the posts. This aimed to identify key framing devices, metaphors, tone, and narrative structures. The goal was to understand how Simion constructs his messages to resonate with his audience, emphasizing themes such as anti-elitism, nationalism, and religiosity.
- (2) *Thematic Coding* of the posts based on the framing categories identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). Each post was classified into one or more of the following frames: responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences, and morality.
- (3) *Quantitative Content Analysis* was conducted to measure the frequency and distribution of the identified frames in the posts. This involved calculating the frequency of key themes and phrases to statistically observe the framing strategies used by Simion. Quantitative data were analysed to identify patterns and trends in framing throughout the campaign.

Analysis Grid

An analytical framework was developed to systematically filter and categorize the content of each post. Table 1 presents the five predominant themes that will be examined in AUR's electoral discourse.

Table 1. *Thematic Coding Framework*

Type of Framing	Description	Examples
Responsibility Framing	Assigns blame or credit for events or situations to specific actors.	Criticizing the EU for Romania's economic difficulties.
Conflict Framing	It emphasizes disagreements or confrontations, often emphasizing the struggle between "the people" and "elites."	Posts discussing the political opposition between the AUR and the Romanian government.
Human Interest Framing	Personalize and dramatize events to evoke emotional responses.	Stories about individuals suffering because of government policies.
Economic Framing	It focuses on the financial implications of events or policies.	Discussions about the economic impact of EU policies on Romania's sovereignty.
Moral Framing	They provide ethical assessments of events and policies, often related to cultural or religious values.	Posts that emphasize traditional family values against progressive EU positions.

Each post was analysed using this grid to determine how it fit into Simion's larger narrative. The grid facilitated a systematic approach to identifying the framing techniques used and provided a basis for comparing different post types and themes.

Research Question and Hypotheses

This study aims to answer the following central research question:

What framing strategies are used in George Simion's political speech on the AUR Facebook page?

Table 2. Research question and hypotheses

Research Question	Hypothesis	Expected Findings
RQ – What are the dominant framing strategies used in George Simion's political communication on Facebook during the campaign for the 2024 European elections?	H1: His communication is predominantly characterized by sovereign framing.	Strong emphasis on national sovereignty, frequent criticism of the EU.
	H2: Anti Elitism is a central element in framing strategies.	High frequency of posts criticizing political elites and the establishment, frequent criticism of the EU.
	H3: Religious themes and moral framing are used extensively in framing strategies.	Frequent references to traditional values, religious holidays and moral judgments.

Table 2 includes three central hypotheses (H1, H2, H3), each addressing a different dimension of George Simion's political discourse, to clearly represent this analysis's approach.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). This hypothesis posits that George Simion's discourse is predominantly sovereignist, with a major emphasis on national sovereignty and resistance to external influences, especially those of the European Union. This reflects Eurosceptic tendencies frequently found in populist discourses in Central and Eastern Europe. Through this hypothesis, I suggest that sovereignty will be a recurring frame in Simion's posts, used to reinforce a sense of national autonomy and to criticize dependence on supranational institutions.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). The second hypothesis proposes that anti-elitism is central to George Simion's framing strategies. Anti-elitism, a defining characteristic of populism, is used to construct a dichotomy

between "pure people" and "corrupt elites." In this context, I expect Simion's speech to constantly criticize the Romanian and European political elites, portraying them as opposed to the interests of the "real people."

Hypothesis 3 (H3). This hypothesis suggests that re-religious themes and morality are used extensively in Simion's speech to mobilize support by appealing to traditional values and Romanian cultural identity. In a country where religion plays a significant role in public life, I expect Simion's political messages to contain frequent references to religion and morality and to protect traditional values in the face of perceived harmful Western influences.

Methodological Considerations and Limitations

This study aims to analyse how George Simion used framing strategies on social networks during the electoral campaign. However, it is essential to highlight some possible methodological limitations that may influence the interpretation of the results.

Subjectivity in thematic coding: Although considerable effort was made to ensure consistent and accurate coding, any thematic analysis process involves a certain amount of subjectivity. The interpretation of political messages inevitably depends on the theoretical searcher's perspective, which is influenced by the researcher's background and the way he perceives the messages, including the nuances of language. To minimize this aspect, the coding was based on the features of populism described in the specialized literature, using the taxonomy proposed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) as a benchmark.

The limitations of the time interval: The study focuses on a strictly defined period, namely the electoral campaign, which allows

a specific analysis of the communication strategies used in this stage. However, this approach may not capture the full range of communication strategies that AURs use outside of the campaign, thus making it difficult to generalize the findings to a wider period of political activity.

Limitations related to the analysed platform: The research focuses on the activity carried out on Facebook, a popular but not unique platform among social networks used by political actors. Because of this, the results obtained cannot necessarily be considered representative of communication on other platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube or Tik-Tok, where approaches and framing strategies could be different.

Engagement metrics: The study evaluates user engagement through indicators such as the number of likes, shares and comments to estimate the impact of posts. However, these metrics do not always accurately reflect the effectiveness of engagement strategies, as several factors, such as the timing of posts or the social and political context of the period in question, can influence online engagement.

Despite these limitations, the proposed methodology provides a useful framework for exploring how framing is used in populist political communication. Therefore, the study makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of the strategies adopted by George Simion and the AUR in the campaign for the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Results

The results obtained based on the analysis of the posts on the AUR's official Facebook page highlight some relevant aspects that can help

create an image of this party's online manifestation during the electoral campaign for the EP in 2024.

25 AUR posts were identified between May 9 and June 7, 2024, in which the leader was present regarding the EP elections.

Table 3. Overview of Data Collection

Data Collection Period	Number of Posts Analysed	Total Likes	Total Comments	Total Shares
May 9, 2024 – June 7, 2024	25	70,338	19,406	18,833

Most of the posts on the AUR Facebook page, in which George Simion is also present, have a message based on the appeal to history. The electoral campaign emphasized the personification of values through historical figures as a determinant of the urge to vote against a political class. The series of historical reenactments through monologues invented by the directors of the election rallies in each county of the country had a double purpose: to transmit an electoral message dressed in nationalist historical metaphors and to be the preamble of the AUR leader's speeches. He then created an imaginary dialogue with the historical characters in the electoral scenography, through which he assumed the role of saviour of the nation. Relevant, in this sense, is that at every election rally, Simion repeated the message: "United we fight the fight of our age".

"We are reborn from the remains dispersed in history and regroup like the Romanian armies destroyed at Stalingrad. Lead the struggle of our age for independence, for sovereignty." (Simion, 2024a)

This struggle is imagined against the system and the national political elites who submitted to foreign rule, betraying national values. Table 4 synthesizes the main directions of attack

against political opponents through the use of nationalist historical symbols.

Table 4. *Framing of AUR's Main Electoral Messages*

Message	Value	Symbol	Framing
"United, we fight the fight of our age"	faith	Stephen the Great	against a political class that supports LGBTQ+ values and sex education.
	unity	Michael the Brave	against a political class: that sold out to outsiders (economically and politically).
	justice	Vlad the Impaler	against a political class: which is corrupt and against the economic and social interests of the majority of Romanians, many of whom (6 million) had to leave the country.

The main framing strategies used in the AUR leader's speeches are responsibility, conflict and morality. In the framework of "responsibility", the message was conveyed to the electorate to go to the polls and vote for the AUR candidates as an act of trans-generational responsibility towards the ancestors who created a country and towards the descendants. In the last week of the election campaign, in the same register of accountability, the calls were sent to the AUR voters to defend the election result because there is a tendency for fraud in the elections by the system.

Attacks against the system and corrupt leaders re-present the main elements of the conflict strategy in Simion's messages. These attacks can be grouped as follows: (a) anti-elite, (b) anti-system, (c) anti-EU, and (d) anti-media. Used together in the same discourse, these conflict sub-frames aim to show that the AUR is the only political party fighting against a corrupt system led by weak leaders who have submitted to foreign interests (mainly from Brussels), making Romania a colony and which, through the mainstream

media tries to annihilate any nationalist and patriotic manifestation in the interest of the citizens. In this case, the favourite metaphor that Simion repeated was:

"They tried to bury us, but they did not know we were seeds!" (Simion, 2024b).

In the moral register of Simion's electoral narrative, several sub-frames can be found: (a) the appeal to the glorious past, (b) the appeal to faith, (c) the appeal to sovereignty and (d) anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-sex education. Relevant to this recruitment strategy is the message he repeatedly sent in his election speeches:

"It is time to make a shield around family, faith, freedom and the people, as our ancestors did, who sacrificed themselves for the country so many times." (Simion, 2024c)

These messages are repetitive in all of Simion's election speeches between May 9 and June 7, 2024. Table 5 records the frequencies of using these framing strategies, and Table 6 shows the level of involvement of Facebook users who follow the official page of AUR.

Table 5. *Frequency of Frames in Facebook Posts*

Frame Type	Number of Posts Using Frame	Percentage (%) of Total Posts
Responsibility Framing	25	100
Conflict Framing	20	80
Human Interest Framing	3	12
Economic Framing	10	40
Moral Framing	14	56

Table 6. *Engagement Values by Frame Type*

Frame Type	Average Likes	Average Comments	Average Shares
Responsibility Framing	2,813	882	753
Conflict Framing	2,258	625	614
Human Interest Framing	131	117	117
Economic Framing	1,244	399	370
Moral Framing	1,591	434	400

Analysis and Conclusions

The analysis of 25 posts on AUR's official Facebook page, where George Simion delivers his electoral message during the European Parliament campaign, highlights several particularities. The message is structured to be repeated in almost all electoral speeches. Essentially, this message is built around historical metaphors that present the glorious and virtuous past of the nation in contrast with a hopeless, morally decadent present, where the people are impoverished by the corrupt elites in Bucharest and Brussels. The anti-EU message is masked through the narrative of the fight against corruption in Brussels, personified by Ursula von der Leyen, and the need to send as many patriotic MEPs as possible to fix what previous MEPs have ruined due to their lack of courage and involvement.

AUR's social media electoral discourse reveals a populist orientation, clearly emphasizing the difference between the people and the elites. George Simion, the party leader, remains the central image of the party and its main communicator with the electorate.

This analysis validated all three research hypotheses formulated at the beginning of the study.

This study identified three major themes that are omnipresent in AUR's discourse: criticism of the elites, national sovereignty, and the protection of traditional national values (faith, family). In response to all the problems highlighted, AUR's leader proposes a direct approach and simple solutions, which are presented as effective for any issue, especially against the elites. This approach is characteristic of genuine populist manifestations.

Finally, through his discourse, Simion aims to present himself in various social media roles that portray him as determined, fearless, and deeply religious. In other words, the AUR leader presents himself and the team he has built as the only solution to all the country's problems.

The main conclusion of this article is that during the European Parliament electoral campaign, the populist message in Romania had a strong Eurosceptic component, driven by the identification of the Brussels authorities as promoters of policies that incite social fears and endanger elements of national and cultural identity.

References

- Alexandrescu, M. (2024). Rolul deputatului european: între alegere și îndatoriri parlamentare. În *Alexandrescu, M. (coord.). Parlamentul european. Între alegeri și acțiune*. Presa Universitară Clujeană.
- Alexandrescu, M., & Stoica, M. S. (2024). Authoritarian demand in East-Central Europe post-pandemic and amid neighbouring war. *Politics and Governance*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8594>
- Arias Maldonado, M. (2017). Rethinking populism in the digital age: Social networks, political affects and post-truth democracies. *XIII Congreso AECPA, Santiago de Compostela*.
- Aslanidis, P. (2016). Is populism an ideology? A refutation and a new perspective. *Political Studies*, 64(1_suppl), 88–104. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12224>

- AUR (2024). Pagina oficială a Alianței pentru Unirea Românilor. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/partidulAUR>
- Bos, L., van der Brug, W., & De Vreese, C. H. (2013). An experimental test of the impact of style and rhetoric on the perception of right-wing populist and mainstream party leaders. *Acta Politica*, 48(2), 192–208. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2012.27>
- Brack, N., & Startin, N. (2015). Introduction: Euroscepticism, from the margins to the mainstream. *International Political Science Review*, 36(3), 239–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512115577231>
- Bretter, Z. (2022). Comparative populism: Romania and Hungary. *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, 13(Special Issue), 183–204. <https://doi.org/10.47743/ejes-2022-SI10>
- Chiru, M., & Wunsch, N. (2023). Democratic backsliding as a catalyst for polity-based contestation? Populist radical right cooperation in the European Parliament. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30(1), 64–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1984546>
- Corbu, N. & Balaban-Bălaș, D. (2016). Romania. Populist Ideology without teeth. In Aalberg, T., Esser, E., Reinemann, C., Stromback, J., De Vreese, C. (eds.) *Populist Political Communication in Europe*. Routledge.
- Dassonneville, R., & McAllister, I. (2023). Are they different? A comparative study of European populist party members. *Party Politics*, 29(1), 16–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688211060652>
- De Vreese, C. H., Esser, F., Aalberg, T., Reinemann, C., & Stanyer, J. (2018). Populism as an expression of political communication content and style: A new perspective. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(4), 423–438. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218790035>
- De Vries, C. E., & Hoffmann, I. (2016). *Fear not values: Public opinion and the populist vote in Europe*. Bertelsmann Stiftung. Retrieved from <http://www.eupinions.eu>
- Gidron, N., & Bonikowski, B. (2013). Varieties of populism: Literature review and research agenda. *Weatherhead Center for International Affairs Working Paper Series*, 13-0004. Harvard University.
- Grad, M., & Marian, C. (2020). Explaining Change: The Online Political Marketing of the Romanian Social Democrats. *European Review*, 28(5), 778–792. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872000023X>

- Hassler, J., Magin, M., Russmann, U., & Fenoll, V. (2021). *Campaigning on Facebook in the 2019 European Parliament Election: Informing, interacting with, and mobilising voters* (1st ed.). Springer International Publishing. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hernández, E., & Kriesi, H. (2016). The electoral consequences of the financial and economic crisis in Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 55(2), 203–224. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12122>
- Hix, S., Whitaker, R., & Zapryanova, G. (2024). The political space in the European parliament: Measuring MEPs' preferences amid the rise of Euroscepticism. *European Journal of Political Research*, 63(1), 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12587>
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2018). Cleavage theory meets Europe's crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the transnational cleavage. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(1), 109–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1310279>
- Maroşan, S. (2023). Online Political Campaign in Romania's Elections (2016–2020). A Systematic Literature Review. *Journal of Global Politics and Current Diplomacy*, 11(1), pp. 83–93.
- Moffitt, B., & Tormey, S. (2014). Rethinking populism: Politics, mediatisation and political style. *Political Studies*, 62(2), 381–397. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12032>
- Momoc, A. (2018). Populism 2.0, digital democracy and the new 'enemies of the people'. *Communication Today*, 9(1), 58–77.
- Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 541–563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>
- Mudde, C. (2024). The far right and the 2024 European elections. *Intereconomics*, 59(2), 61–65. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ie-2024-0014>
- Müller, J.-W. (2016). *What is populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019). *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pirro, A. L. P., Taggart, P., & van Kessel, S. (2018). The populist politics of Euroscepticism in times of crisis: Comparative conclusions. *Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718770599>
- Rooduijn, M. (2014). The nucleus of populism: In search of the lowest common denominator. *Government and Opposition*, 49(4), 573–599. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2013.30>

- Sasu, C., & Androniciuc, A. (2017). How do Romanian politicians communicate online? An emphasis on Facebook. *"Ovidius" University Annals, Economic Sciences Series*, 17(2), 461–466.
- Simion, G. (2024a). „Pe 9 iunie ducem lupta veacului nostru și contribuim la istoria de AUR a României!” Facebook – AUR, postare 17 Mai. <https://www.facebook.com/partidulAUR/videos/1513614499189285>
- Simion, G. (2024b). „Prezentarea candidaților AUR la alegeri – Cluj, 11 mai 2024”. Facebook – AUR, postare 11 Mai. <https://www.facebook.com/partidulAUR/videos/402952036057724>
- Simion, G. (2024c). „Anul acesta este anul în care vom opri PSD, PNL, UDMR și USR!”. Facebook – AUR, postare 19 Mai. <https://www.facebook.com/partidulAUR/videos/414921354763530/>
- Soare, S., & Tufiş, C. D. (2018). Phoenix Populism: Radical Right Parties' Mobilization in Romania after 2015. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 66(1), 8–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2018.1460158>
- Stier, S., Froio, C., & Ho, J. (2023). Mainstreaming the populist radical right? Online news exposure and voting behavior in the 2019 European Parliament election. *European Political Science Review*, 16(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175577392300022X>
- Stoica, M. S. (2018). Romanian Populism: Between Radical Nationalism and Communist Nostalgia. În U. Kovala & E. Palonen (Eds.), *Populism on the Loose: Seminal Reflections on the Condition of Differentiability*. Jyväskylä: Nykykulttuurin Tutkimuskeskuksen Julkaisuja, pp. 99–116.
- Stoica, M. S. (2023). European Identity in the Proximity of War. Assessing Support for Eurosceptic Populism in Romania. În Alexandrescu, M. (coord.). *Citizens of the European Union: Status, Identity and Beyond*. Presa Universitară Clujeană, pp. 127–143.
- Ștefănel, A., Momoc, A., & Surugiu, R. (2023). Downplaying Euroscepticism in mainstream media: The Schengen accession of Romania and Bulgaria. *Media and Communication*, 11(4), 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i4.7131>
- Treib, O. (2020). Euroscepticism is here to stay: What cleavage theory can teach us about the 2019 European Parliament elections. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27(7), 109–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1737881>



ISBN: 978-606-37-2342-1